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No. 19

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Science Fantasy

Vol. 7 No. 19

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Readers of our companion magazine New Worlds will long remember E. C. Tubb's fascinating serial "Star Ship" wherein all the action took place inside a starship making a 300 year journey. Equally as powerful and fascinating is the following story—the arrival on Earth of a starship complete with a colonial crew. What they expected to find and what really happened is brilliantly portrayed by Mrs. Bradley.

THE CLIMBING WAVE

By MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

Illustrated by QUINN

Brian Kearns knew to the second, by his ship-time chronometer and by the faint, almost imperceptible humming of a monitor screen, when the limit of gravity tolerance was reached. Giving himself a round ten seconds for safety margin—Brian was a practical and methodical young man, and had spent twelve years training for this work and four and a half years doing it—he unfastened the straps on his sky-hook, the free-swinging, nest-like lounge cradle where he had been lying with ears and eyes fastened on the complex controls. He inched patiently, fly-like, down the wall, braced himself to a handhold, and threw a certain switch to the farthest position leftward.

The barely perceptible humming stopped.

Brian Kearns had just put himself out of a job.

He picked up the stylus chained to the logbook, held a floating page down with his right hand and wrote swiftly and expertly with his left :

"1676th day of voyage; have just thrown switch which cut the interstellar drives. Our calculations were correct and there appear to have been no visible shock effects as the IS units went out of function. We are now standing fourteen hundred miles off Mars. Relinquished control of ship at—" he glanced at the chronometer again, and wrote "—0814 hours. Position . . ." He added a series of complicated numerals scribbled his initials beneath the entry, then picked up the hook of the intercabin communicator and wagged it.

A dim rasping voice said from the other end of the starship, almost half a mile away, "That you, Kearns?"

"Right, Caldwell."

"We're standing by with atomics back here, Brian. Were the figures right?"

"All calculations appear to have been correct," Brian answered stiffly. "The drives have been cut according to the schedule previously worked out."

"Yippee!" the voice shouted from the loudspeaker, and Brian frowned and coughed reprovingly. The faraway voice appeared to be stifling an expletive, but inquired correctly: "Standing by for orders, Captain Kearns?"

"All right, Captain Caldwell," Brian said; "she's your ship, as of—" he stopped, glanced at the chronometer again, and after a few seconds said "*now*!"

He put down the hook and looked around the main control room, in which he had spent the best part of the *Homeward's* long voyage. The tremendous interstellar drives were silent now, their dim hum still, and the metal surfaces faced him with a blank, metallic unresponsiveness. Brian had a curious feeling of anticlimax while he recapped the stylus, slid a moving panel over the logbook, and clung there to the handhold, wondering with the back part of his mind if he had left anything undone, while knowing, with the sureness of long habit, that he had not.

It is impossible to shrug one's shoulders in free fall; the motion sends you flying across the cabin, and Brian was too well-trained to make waste emotions of that sort. But his eyebrow lifted a little, and a sort of elated grin spread across his face; for a minute, unobserved, he looked almost as young as he was. Then, re-schooling his expression to the gravity he always wore in the presence of his crew, he inched back across the wall, methodically unstrapped his rubber sandals from

their place in the skyhook, worked his feet into them with the skill of long practice, and, pulling himself swiftly across the remaining section of wall, wriggled the forward part of his body through the sphincter lock which led to the forward part of the great starship.

There he paused, his middle clasped firmly by the expanding diaphragm, looking down the narrow, cylindrical corridor. He could feel, now, the faint vibration all around him, as far away in the nose of the *Homeward* the atomic rockets began firing. He allowed himself to grin again, this time with the secret contempt of a hyperdrive technician for rockets, however necessary, and slowly hauled the rest of his long, narrow body through the sphincter; then, pushing his feet hard against the diaphragm which had snapped tight behind him, he arrowed down, in a straight line, his body rocketing weightless down the corridor. He braked himself with strong hands at the far end, then paused; there was a musical mewling behind him, and the ship's cat, Einstein—actually a Centaurian mammal more nearly resembling a dwarf kangaroo—somersaulted dizzily through the air toward him.

"Brian—catch him!" a girl's voice called, and Brian turned, hooking one rubber sandal through a strap, and made a wide sweeping grab for the creature. He caught it by one spindly leg; it squalled and thrashed to get away, and the girl called anxiously "Hang on, I'm coming." She propelled herself down the corridor, and hurriedly snatched the little animal, who immediately quieted and snuggled under her chin.

"He went crazy when the rockets started," she murmured apologetically. "It must be the vibration or something."

Brian grinned down at the girl, who was small and slight, her curly fair hair standing weirdly around her head and her prim brief overall floating out in odd billows. They had all lived at free fall conditions for so long that he barely noticed this, but he did see the disquiet in her brown eyes—Elinor Wade was a food culturist, and knew rather less about the drives than the Centaurian cat.

"It's all right, Ellie; maybe Einstein's a hyperdrive technician. I just cut the IS units and turned the ship over to Caldwell."

She whispered, "Then we're almost there! Oh, Brian!" and her eyes were a double star, first magnitude. He nodded. "It's Caldwell's command now, so I don't know what he'll do," Brian added, "but you'd better keep your ears lapped over for instructions. We'll have to strap in, in a few minutes, for deceleration, if he's going to brake in at Mars."

"Brian, I'm scared . . ." Ellie whispered, and let the Centaurian cat float free, fumbling around for his hand. "It would be—hideously

ironical, if this old ship travelled to Centaurus and back, and then cracked up in atmosphere—"

"Relax," Brian advised her genially. "He may decide to go on to Earth, anyway—Caldwell knows his business, Ellie. And I know the *Homeward*."

"You certainly do." The girl attempted a smile, which somehow missed its purpose. "You're in love with this old wreck!"

Brian grinned disarmingly. "I won't deny it," he answered. "But it's just a kind of substitute passion till I can get you down to earth!"

The girl blushed and turned her face away from him. The twelve members of the *Homeward's* crew were all young, and the confined quarters aboard generated strong attachments; but men and women were carefully segregated aboard ship, for an excellent and practical reason which had nothing to do with morality. The trip from Centaurus, even at hyperspeeds, took the best part of five years. And no one had yet discovered any method for delivering a baby in free fall.

Brian unhooked his rubber shoe. "Going into the lounge?"

"No . . ." She hung back. "I've got to feed Einstein, after—Paula's still in the Food Culture unit, and there's no public address system in there—I'd better go and tell her we may have to strap in. Go on ahead, and I'll tell Paula—"

"I'll come with you. I'm hungry and I want to snatch a bite before we go out, anyhow—"

"No!" The sharpness of her voice amazed him. "Go on out in the lounge, I'll bring you something."

He stared at her. "What—"

"Go on. Paula's—Paula's—" Ellie fumbled and finished—"she's dressing in there."

"What the devil—" Brian, suddenly suspicious, shoved hard against the handhold, and barrelled across the corridor to the open lock of the Food Culture unit. Ellie gave a wordless cry of warning as Brian fell through the doorway, and in the aftermath of that cry, beneath Brian's intrusive stare, two fused figures jerked convulsively and thrust apart. Paula Sandoval flung her arms over her face and grabbed at a floating garment, while Tom Mellen jackknifed upright and glared belligerently at Brian.

"Get the hell out of here!" he roared, simultaneous with Brian's needle-voiced "What's going on in here?"

There was blue vitriol in Paula Sandoval's taut voice. "I think you can see what goes on, Captain!" and her black eyes snapped fire at him.

"Brian—" Ellie implored, her hand on his wrist with a gentle, repressive force. He threw it off with a violence that flung her halfway across the cabin.

He said, with icy command, "You'd better get up front, Paula. Caldwell will need his figures checked. As for you, Mellen, regulations—"

"Regulations go jump in a hot jet, and you too!" Tom Mellen stormed. He was a loose-limbed young fellow, well over six feet tall and looking longer. "What the hell do you think you're doing anyway, pushing your weight around?"

"Look," Brian said tersely, and jerked around to the girls, "Paula, get up front—that's an order! Tom, this part of the ship is off limits for men except at regular meal periods. This is the fifth time—"

"The sixth to be exact, Captain's Log-book, and four times you didn't catch me. So what? What the hell are you, a blasted—"

"We'll leave my personal habits out of the matter, Mister Mellen. *Sandoval*!" he flung at Paula. "I gave you an order!"

Ellie had her arms around Paula, who was sobbing harshly, but the small dark girl pulled away from Ellie, her eyes ablaze. "Give him another one for me, Tom," she said bitterly, and scooted out of the cabin. Brian added, more quietly. "You go too, Ellie. I'll settle this with Mellen right now."

But Ellie did not move. "Brian," she said quietly, "this is a pretty stupid time to be enforcing that regulation."

"As long as the *Homeward* is in space," Brian said tightly, "that particular regulation—and all others based on principles of necessity—will be enforced."

"You listen here—" Mellen began furiously, then abruptly, his face suffusing with violent colour, he flung himself upward at Brian, before Kearns realized what was coming. "The atomics are on," he grated. "Which means Caldwell's captain! And for three years I've been waiting for this—"

Brian dodged in a queer, jerky gesture, and Mellen hurtled over his head, thrown on by the momentum of his own blow. "*Brian! Tom!*" Ellie begged, diving toward them and thrusting her rubber-sandaled feet between the men, but Mellen shoved her aside.

"I'm warning you, Ellie, get out of the way—" he panted. Brian started, "Look here—" then, as Mellen plunged at him again, put out both hands and shoved hard.

Momentum met momentum. Brian and Mellen spun apart with such violence that heads cracked at opposite ends of the food culture unit, and Brian, half-stunned, dragged himself groggily upright.

Mellen's laughter, wry and ironical, filled the cabin.

"Okay, damn it," he said bitterly. "I suppose there's no use having it out here and now. But just wait till I get you down to earth—"

Brian rubbed his head and blinked dizzily, but his voice was precise, giving no hint of the shooting stars that were chasing themselves before his eyes. "By that time," he answered coldly, "there will no longer be occasion for fighting, since my command will have terminated."

Mellen tightened his mouth, and Ellie interceded anxiously: "Tom, Brian is perfectly right, theoretically—don't stir up hard feelings now, when we're almost home—"

"Yeah, that's right . . ." Tom Mellen suddenly grinned, and his face was good-natured. "Hey, Brian, how about it? No hard feelings, huh?"

Brian turned away. He said frigidly, "Why should there be hard feelings? It's my duty to enforce regulations until the *Homeward* is down."

"God damn—" Mellen muttered under his breath at Brian's rigid back, and even Ellie looked troubled. Then Mellen made a useless movement and started toward the front of the ship.

"Come on. I expect Caldwell will be wanting us," he said tightly, and propelled himself in quick, wrathful jerks toward the forward lounge.

II.

The technique of braking into atmosphere had been perfected a hundred years before the old *Starward* rose from Earth to aim at Centaurus. However, it was new to the *Homeward's* crew, and the tediousness of the process set nerves to jittering. Only Brian, strapped into one of the skyhooks in the lounge, was really calm, and Ellie, in the cradle next to his, absorbed a little of his calm confidence; Brian Kearns had been trained aboard the *Homeward* for twelve years before the trip began.

It had taken four generations for the stranded crew of the original ship, the *Starward*, to repair the hyperdrives smashed in landing, and to wrest from the soil of θ Centauri fourth planet—Terra Two, they called it—enough cerberum to take a pilot crew back to earth with news of their success. A hundred and thirty years, subjective time. Taking account of the time-lags engendered by their hyperspeeds, it was entirely possible that four or five hundred years had elapsed, objectively, on the planet their ancestors had left. Ellie, looking across at Brian's calm face, at his mouth that persisted in grinning with some personal, individual elation when he thought himself unwatched, wondered if he felt no regrets at all. Ellie struggled with a moment of blinding homesickness, remembering their last view of the little dark planet spinning around the red star. They had left a growing

colony of 400 souls, a world to which they could never return, for, after five years of subjective time in hyperspeeds, it was entirely possible that everyone they had known on Terra Two had already lived out a full lifetime.

But Brian's thoughts were moving forward, not backward, and he could not keep them to himself.

"I suppose by now they've discovered a better method for braking into atmosphere," he mused. "If anybody's watching us, down there, we probably look like living fossils—and I suppose we are. In their world, we'll be so obsolete that we'll feel like stone-age man!"

"Oh, I don't know," Ellie protested. "People don't change—"

"But civilizations do," Brian insisted. "There was less than a hundred years between the first rocket to Luna and the launching of the *Starward*. That's how fast scientific civilization can move."

"But how can you be sure they've moved along those lines?" Ellie wanted to know.

"Have you ever heard of time-binding?" he asked derisively. "When each generation accumulates the knowledge of the one before it, progress is a perfectly cumulative, straightforward thing. When the *Starward* left—"

"Brian—" she began, but he rushed on: "I grant you that man progressed at random for thousands of years, but when he acquired the scientific method, it was less than a hundred years from jet plane to rocketship. A race which had interstellar travel could progress in only one direction. If we wanted to take the time, we could sit down with an electronic calculator and add it all up, and predict exactly what we'd find down there."

"It seems," Ellie said slowly, "That you're leaving out the human element. The crew of the *Starward* were all scientists, hand-picked for compatibility, and the Terra Two colony is probably the nearest thing to a homogeneous society that ever existed. You can't make that kind of prediction for a normally populated planet."

"The human element—"

"Will you two quit it?" shouted Langdon Forbes angrily from his skyhook. "I'm trying not to get spacesick, but Kearns sounding off about progress is about all I can take! Does he have to pick a time when we're strapped in, and can't get away?"

Brian grumbled something unintelligible and lapsed into morose silence. Ellie reached dragging fingers, newly clumsy, toward him, but he pushed the hand away.

A dismal wailing came from beneath Ellie's skyhook; Einstein was getting reacquainted with gravity, and didn't like it. Ellie scooped up

the miserable little animal and held it cuddled tight against her straps. It was silent in the lounge; the steady, low vibration of the atomic drives was a sound already so deeply embedded in their consciousness that they did not think of it as sound at all. There was still no feeling of motion, but there was an unpleasant, dragging sensation as the enormous starship made its wide braking circles, first grazing the atmosphere for a second or two, as it swung elliptically, like a crazy comet; then entering atmosphere for a few seconds, then a full minute, then a few minutes—coming “down” in slow, careful spirals.

“I hope they’ve found some way to put artificial gravity in space-ships,” Judy Keretsky moaned, half-laughing, from the skyhook where she swung, upside down, from what was now the ceiling of the lounge. Her long, curly hair fell down over her head in a thick curtain; she alone of starship’s crew did not keep her hair clipped functionally short. She batted futilely at the waving curls as she wailed, “Oh, my poor head, I’m getting di-i-izzy up here!”

“You’re getting dizzy! What about this poor cat!” Ellie jibed.

“Say, whose idea was it to bring that animal along, anyhow?” someone demanded.

“Very valuable contribution to science,” Judy burlesqued. “Why didn’t you bring a pair of them, Ellie!”

“Brian wouldn’t let her,” Marcia van Schreeven jeered, with an undertone of bitterness.

Ellie patted Einstein’s darkish fur defensively, reminding Marcia in her peaceful voice: “Einstein is one of the third gender. When conditions are right, he’ll reproduce in the first and second.”

“Lucky animal,” Brian said half-seriously, and Ellie glanced at him with unusual shyness as she murmured, “Well, Einstein will be unique on Earth, anyhow!”

“You’ll see things much weirder than Einstein,” Brian said off-handedly. “We’ve only been on one planet, and by now, Earth has probably colonized all the nearer stars. The people of Earth will be cosmopolitan in the largest sense—”

“Speaking of Earth,” Langdon forcibly headed him off before he could hold forth again, “where on the planet are we going to set this thing down?”

“We won’t know that till we contact the surface,” Judy said irritably, batting her hair back. “We have the map the Firsts gave us, but it’s unthinkable that the old spaceport at Denver would still be in use, and if it is, it would probably be so changed that we wouldn’t know how to land—and too crowded for an IS ship this size.”

“You’ve been listening to Brian,” Langdon grinned. “According to him, it’s a wonder we haven’t already bumped into the local rocket for the second galaxy!”

Brian ignored the confusion of technical terms and answered seriously "That's why I suggested landing on Mars. There are enough desert areas on Mars where we could have landed without any danger of damaging urbanized sections. I doubt if the population there is quite so centralized—"

"Well, why *didn't* we?" Marcia queried sharply, and Langdon, frowning, twisted his head to her. "We tried to radio them from space," he answered, "but they evidently didn't pick up our signals. So Caldwell and Mellen decided to bring us in to Earth instead of wasting time braking in at Mars and maybe having to pick up again. We haven't enough fuel for more than one landing and pick-up."

"We could certainly have refuelled at Mars—" Brian began, but was interrupted by an apologetic cough from the loudspeaker in the centre of the lounge.

"Hey, Kearns," it said in a puzzled rasp. "Brian Kearns, come on up forward, will you? Kearns, please come up to the front control room, if you can."

Brian scowled, and started painfully unbuckling the straps on his skyhook. "Now what does Mellen want—" he wondered aloud.

"What's the matter?" Judy squeaked, "Are we in trouble?"

"Oh, hush!" Ellie commanded. "If we are, we'll be told!" She watched, with vague disquiet, as Brian crawled over the side of his skyhook and abruptly tumbled two feet, not very hard, to the floor. "Weight's on the axis now," he announced wryly to no one in particular. "Good thing I wasn't up where Judy is, or I'd have broken my neck! Somebody will have to lift her down—"

Judy squeaked again, but Ellie snapped at her: "Just stay where you are until we find out what's going on!" and watched, disturbed, as Brian crawled clumsily on hands and knees across the wall which lay along the central axis of the starship and therefore "down." He pushed at the refractory sphincter lock—it worked perfectly only in free fall—and forced his head and shoulders through into the forward control room.

Tom Mellen, his short hair bristling upright around his head, twisted around as Brian wriggled his shoulders through. "We've tried to raise them by FM, AM and wavicle," he said, scowling, "but they don't answer. Not a sign of a signal. What do you think of that, Brian?"

Brian looked deliberately around the cabin. Paula Sandoval, strapped in before the navigation instruments, hunched her bare, tanned shoulders and refused to meet his eyes; Caldwell, the grey-haired veteran who had repaired the atomic rockets, grinned truculently. Mellen's face was puzzled and defensive.

"I said it off Mars," Brian told them, "and I say it again; we're just wasting time trying to raise them with any communication devices aboard. By now, they're probably using something so far beyond radio or wavicles that they can't pick us up. Their equipment would be too fine for our clumsy primitive devices to—"

"Clumsy primitive—" Caldwell broke off, visibly summoning patience, and Mellen interrupted fiercely. "Look, Kearns, there are just so many ways of transmitting electric impulses."

"The first spacemen said that all fuels had to be chemical or atomic, didn't they?" Brian snapped. "And we came on cerberum. The world didn't end when the *Starward* left! You've got to realize that we've been stranded in what amounts to a time-warp for five hundred years or so, and we're hopelessly obsolete!"

"Maybe so . . ." Mellen said slowly, and waggled the switch again. Brian irritably flipped it shut.

"Why keep fussing with it, Tom? If they'd picked up our signals, they'd have answered by now. Have you seen any rockets entering or leaving?"

"Nothing larger than twelve centimeters since we entered the orbit," Mellen told him.

Brian frowned. "Where are we, Paula?"

The girl gave him a venomous look, but she glanced at her instruments and replied, "Orbiting at forty miles, velocity five point six m.p.s."

Kearns glanced at Caldwell. "You're the Captain—"

"In a limited sense," Caldwell said slowly, and returned his steady gaze. "That's why I wanted you up here. There are two things we can do. We can go down under the cloud layer—and maybe risk getting shot at—to find a place to set down, or else go on a permanent orbit, and send somebody down in the pickup."

"The pickup," Brian decided immediately. "Can you imagine trying to land a ship this size without instructions from outside? For all we know, there may be laws about landing spaceships. The pickup can set down in a few square yards. Whoever goes down can locate a spaceport big enough to handle the *Homeward* and see about getting the necessary permissions."

"You're overlooking one thing," Mellen forced the words out. "Suppose they haven't any spaceports!"

"They'd have to have spaceports, Tom," Caldwell protested, "even for interplanetary ships." And Brian added, "It's impossible that we'd have been the only interstellar ship—"

"That isn't what I mean," Mellen protested. "Surely one of the planets, Mars or Earth, would have picked up our signals. Someone

must use radio for something, even if it's purely local. That is, if there's anyone down there at all!"

Brian snorted laughter. "You mean some kind of end-of-the-world disaster?" he asked, elaborately sarcastic but Mellen took him seriously. "Something like that."

"There's one way we can find out," Caldwell interrupted. "Do you want to take the pickup down, Brian? We won't be using the IS drives again—there's nothing more you can do aboard."

"I'll go," Brian said shortly, but he could barely conceal his eagerness, and even forgot his animosity toward Mellen for a minute. "Shall I take Tom to handle the radio?"

Caldwell frowned, and answered half practically and half tactfully, "I'll need Tom, and Paula too, to bring the ship down when we're ready. Langdon can handle the radio in the pickup. And take a couple of others too; Mellen may or may not be right, but I don't think any crew members ought to go down alone until we know exactly what we'll find down there."

Caldwell's seriousness made little impression on Brian, but he realized that he would need someone to pilot the pickup in any case; his own training had fitted him only to handle the complex interstellar drives. And Langdon should, they decided, keep the radio at his fingertips, to report instantly to the *Homeward* in case of any unforeseen events.

So it was Ellinor Wade who took the controls of the small jet-driven strato-plane, which had been designed for ship-to-surface shuttling, and used during the final stages of repair on the *Homeward*. She let the small plane sink through the thick clouds, and asked, "Where do we want to set down?"

Langdon bent over the carefully copied map. "Judy's scribbled all over this thing," he complained. "But try North America, midwest. That's where the first rocket ranges were built, and we all speak English, after a fashion."

"Unless the language has changed too much," Brian murmured. Ellie frowned as she brought the swift little jet down, arcing across an unfamiliar land-mass; Brian and Langdon squeezed their hands to their eyes as the clouds thinned, for the sudden blaze of yellow light was like a stab in the eyeballs. Lighting aboard ship, of course, was keyed to the familiar crimson noon of Terra Two, under which the crew had lived all their lives. Ellie squinted over the instrument panel, using an unladylike word under her breath.

The ship dived over rolling hills, and Brian let out his breath slowly as the serried regular skyline of massive buildings cleaved the horizon,

and said in an edgy-voice, "I was beginning to wonder if Mellen had been right about those atomic deserts!"

Ellie warned, "From what the Firsts have told us, I don't care to get tangled up in a city airport! Let's find an open space and set down there." She headed northward from the city, and asked, "Have either of you seen anything that looks like transportation? Planes, rockets, anything on the ground?"

"Nothing at all with the naked eye," Langdon frowned, "and nothing moving that beeps the radar. And I've been watching pretty close."

"Funny . . ." Ellie murmured.

From this height everything was clear, and as they swerved groundward, details became sharply incised in miniature: wide ploughed fields, scattered, toy-like houses, clusters of small buildings. There seemed to be animals in the fields. Langdon smiled. "Just like home," he said happily, meaning Terra Two. "Regular rural community, except that everything looks *green*!"

"That's this ridiculous yellow light!" Ellie said, absently, and Brian scoffed, "Just like home! Better get set for a shock, Langdon!"

"It might be you that gets the shock," Langdon answered unexpectedly, and peered over Ellie's shoulder at the controls. "The ground's level here, Ellie."

The pickup bumped ground and rolled gently; Langdon's fingers moved delicately on the radio panel, and he made a brief report in staccato speech while Brian unsealed the door. Strange smells wafted into the cabin, and the three crowded together in the entrance, eyes squinted against the stabbing light, strangely reluctant, at the last, to set foot on the unfamiliar soil.

"It's cold . . ." Ellie shivered in her thin garment.

Langdon looked down, dismayed. "You've set down in somebody's grainfield!" he reproached. Food was still conserved carefully on Terra Two, more from habit than from serious privation; Man's conquest of the new planet was uncertain, and the colony took no chances. The three felt a twinging guilt as they looked down at the blackened spears of grain, and Ellie clutched at Brian's arm. "Someone's coming—" she faltered.

Across the evenly ploughed ridges between rows of ripening wheat, a boy of thirteen walked, steadily and unhurried. He was not very tall, but looked sturdy; his face was deeply tanned under square-cut dark hair, and he was wearing a loose shirt and breeches tucked into low boots, all the same rich deep-brown colour. Even Brian was silent as the boy advanced to the very foot of the pickup plane, paused and

looked up at it, then glanced up indifferently at the three in the doorway, and began to move around to the tail, toward the smoking jets.

Brian quickly dropped Ellie's hand and scrambled to the ground. "Hey there!" he called, forgetting the prepared speech on his lips. "Better not go around there, it's dangerous—*hot*!"

The boy desisted at once, turning to gaze at him, and after a moment he said in slurred but perfectly understandable English, "I saw the streak, and hoped that a meteor had fallen." He laughed, turned and began to walk away from them.

Brian looked blankly up at Ellie and Langdon. The man jumped down and gave Ellie a hand as she called after the boy "Please—wait a minute—"

He looked around, politely, and before his indifferent courtesy Brian felt the words melting from his lips. It was Langdon who finally said, in an empty voice, "Where can we—We have a message for the—The Government. Where can we get—transportation—to the City?"

"The City?" The boy stared. "What for? Where did you come from? The—the City?"

Brian quietly assumed command of the situation again. "We are from the first Centaurian expedition, the *Starward*," he said. "We, or rather our ship, left this planet hundreds of years ago."

"Oh?" The boy smiled in a friendly way. "Well, I suppose you are glad to be back. Over that hill," he pointed, "you will find a road which goes towards the City." He turned again, this time with a definite air of finality, and started to walk away.

The three travellers stared at one another in blank indignation. Brian finally took a step forward and shouted: "Hey, come back here!"

With an irritated jerk of his head, the boy turned. "Now what do you want?" he demanded.

Ellie said conciliatingly, "This is only the pickup of our ship. We have to—to find someone who can tell us where to bring the spaceship down. As you can see," she gestured toward the ruined wheat, "our jets have destroyed a part of the crop here. Our spaceship is much larger, and we don't want to do any more damage. Perhaps your father—"

The boy's face, puzzled at first, had cleared while she was talking. "My father is not in our village now," he informed them, "but if you will come with me, I will take you to my grandfather."

"If you could tell us where the nearest spaceport is—" Brian suggested.

The boy frowned. "Spaceport?" he repeated. "Well, maybe my grandfather can help you."

He turned again, and led the way across the field. Langdon and Ellie followed at once; Brian hung back, looking uneasily at the pickup. The boy glanced over his shoulder. "You need not be anxious about your plane," he called, laughing. "It's too large to be stolen!"

Brian stiffened; the boy's attitude was just derisive enough to put him on the defensive. Then, realizing the futility of anger, he broke into a run to catch up with the others. When he came near them, the boy was saying, a little sulkily, "I thought that I would be fortunate enough to find a fallen meteor! I have never seen a meteorite." Then, making a tardy attempt to remember his manners, he added politely, "Of course, I have never seen a spaceship either—" but it was evident that a spaceship was a very poor substitute.

Ellie's thinly shod feet stumbled on the uneven ground, and all three were glad when they came out on a smoothed road which wound between low flowering trees. There seemed to be no vehicles of any kind for the road was just wide enough to permit the four to walk abreast. The boy's walk was rapid, and he kept moving, almost unconsciously, ahead of them, then looking back and deliberately slowing his steps. Once when he had forged ahead, Langdon murmured, "Evidently vehicular traffic has been completely diverted from rural neighbourhoods!" and Brian whispered, "This is incredible! Either that boy's half-witted, or else even the children here are so blasé that the first star-expedition doesn't mean anything to them!"

"I wouldn't be too sure," Ellie said slowly. "There's something that we don't understand. Let's not try to figure things out ahead, Brian. Let's just take them as they come."

III.

Muscles virtually unused for nearly five years were aching by the time the narrow road wound into a village of low clustered houses, built of what seemed to be greyish field stone. A profuse display of flowers bloomed in elaborate geometrical patterns around nearly every doorstep, and little groups of children, dressed in smocks of dark yellow or pale reddish-grey, were chasing one another haphazardly on the lawns, shouting something rhythmic and tuneful. Most of the houses had low trellised porches, and women in short light dresses sat in little groups on the porches. The street was not paved, and the women did not appear busy; their low-pitched conversation was a musical hum, and all down the street the three strangers could hear a sound of singing. A man's voice, singing in a low, monotonous rise

and fall of notes. It was toward this sound of singing that the boy led them, up the steps of a porch which was not trellised but roofed, and through an open door.

They stepped into a wide, light room. Two walls seemed to open in slatted shutters, giving a view of an evenly patterned garden; on another wall was a large fireplace, where embers flickered quietly, and there was a gleaming kettle of some light, brilliant metal swung on a crane over the embers. It reminded Brian of a picture in one of his oldest history books, and he blinked at the anachronism. The other furniture in the room was unfamiliar, low cushioned seats built against the walls, and a few closed doors on the fourth wall. From an inner room, the singing filled the house: a baritone voice, rich and resonant, rising and falling in slow, unfamiliar harmonic patterns.

The boy called: "Grandpa!"

The singer finished one of the odd phrases; then the song ceased, and the three strangers heard slow, deliberate steps behind the closed door. It swung back, and a tall old man came out into the main room.

He looked like the boy. His hair was clipped short, but grew down along his cheeks, although his chin was shaven clean; he wore a shirt and breeches of the same rich brown, but his feet were thrust into slippers of stitched leather. He looked strong and vigorous; his hands, tanned and knotty, were extremely well-kept, though somewhat stained and he stood very erect, surveying them with great composure, while his deep-set dark eyes studied them from their clipped and tended hair to their rubber-sandaled feet. The composure gradually gave way to a quizzical smile, and he came forward a few steps. His voice was a singer's voice, full and very strong.

"Be welcome, friends. You are at home. Destry, who are our guests?"

The boy said calmly "They came down in a spaceship, grandpa, or rather, part of one. That streak wasn't a meteor at all. They said they wanted to go to the City. So I brought them along to you instead."

The man's face did not change by a fraction. Brian had been looking for surprise, or some more tangible emotion, but the man only surveyed them equably.

"Please be seated," he invited graciously. "I am Hard Frobisher, friends, and this is my grandson Destry."

The three sank on one of the cushioned seats, feeling a little like children in their first learning-period before the Firsts. Only Brian had presence of mind enough to murmur their names.

"Brian Kearns—Ellinor Wade—Langdon Forbes—"

The old man repeated the names, bowing courteously to Ellie, at which the girl could barely conceal her amazement. He enquired, smiling, "Can I be of assistance to you?"

Brian stood up. "The boy didn't tell you, sir, but we're from the first Centaurus expedition—the *Starward*."

"Oh?" A faint flicker of interest crossed Hard Frobisher's face. "That was a good long time ago, I am told. Did the Barbarians have some means, then, of prolonging life beyond its appointed limits?"

Brian's patience had already gone a long way beyond its appointed limits, and now, abruptly, it deserted him.

"Look, sir. We're from the first expedition into interstellar space. The *first*. None of us left Earth on the *Starward*. We weren't born. Our hyperspeeds, if you know what they are—which I'm beginning to doubt—threw us into a time-lag. There's no need to call us Barbarians, either. The ship's drives were smashed when they landed, and we've been four generations, *four generations*, getting it in operable condition to come back to Earth. None of us has ever been on Earth before. We're strangers here, understand? We have to ask our way around. We asked a civil question. Now if we could kindly have a civil answer—"

Hard Frobisher raised a placating hand. "I am sorry," he said calmly. "I didn't understand. Just what do you want me to do about it?"

Brian made a visible attempt to keep his temper. "Well, first, we want to get in touch with the authorities. Then I want to find a place where we can bring our spaceship down—"

Frobisher was frowning, and Brian fell silent.

"Frankly," the old man said, "I don't know whom you'd contact about a thing like that. There is plenty of open land to the south, nearer the city, where you might land your ship—"

"Now look—" Brian started, but Langdon touched his arm. So Brian only asked, "If you could tell us how to get in touch with the Government . . . ?"

"Well," the old man said neutrally, "there are three governors in our village, but they only regulate the school hours, and make rules about locking houses. I wouldn't want to bother them about something foolish like this. I don't think they'd have much to say about your . . . oh, yes, spaceship."

That silenced Brian and Langdon completely. Ellie, feeling as if they were being tangled into a giant spiderweb, asked desperately, "Could we go to some other, perhaps some larger place?"

Frobisher looked at her, frankly puzzled.

"It's half a day's walk to Camey," he said, "and when you got there, they would tell you the same thing. You are perfectly welcome to put your spaceship down on our barrens, if you want to."

Brian stiffened belligerently. "Now let's get this straight. There's a city over there. There must be some one there in authority!"

"Oh, the City!" Frobisher's voice held dismissal, "Nobody's lived in any of the cities for years! Why would you want to go there?"

Langdon said, baffled, "Look, Mr. Frobisher. We've come all the way from Centaurus, to being Earth the news about our expedition. We'd expected to be surprised at what we found—after all, it has been a long time since the *Starward* left. But are we supposed to understand from this run-around you're giving us that there's nobody to listen, that the first of the interstellar expeditions doesn't mean anything to anyone?"

"Should it?" asked Frobisher, and his face was even more baffled than Brian's. "I can understand your personal predicament somewhat—after all, you've come a long way, but why? Didn't you like it where you were? There is only one reason why people move from one place to another—and it seems to me that you have overdone it."

The room was silent. Hard Frobisher stood up, looking indecisively at his guests, and Brian half expected him to repeat Destry's move and walk away, uninterested; but he merely went to the fireplace and peered into the kettle.

"Food is prepared," he remarked. "Can I invite you to join us? Good food is ill-seasoned by dissension, and there is no wisdom in an empty belly."

Brian and Langdon just sat and looked dumbly at Frobisher. It was Ellie who said firmly, "Thank you, Mr. Frobisher," and dug an elbow into Brian's ribs, whispering savagely, "Behave yourself!"

The boy Destry came and helped his grandfather bring food from the fireplace and from an inner room; he conducted the strangers to seats around a sort of table. The food was unfamiliar and not altogether pleasant to the strangers, accustomed to the elaborate synthetics of the ship; Brian, altogether out of humour, made almost no effort to conceal his distaste, and Langdon ate listlessly; Hard and Destry ate with the unfeigned appetite of men who spend much time in the open air, and neither spoke much during the meal except to urge food upon their guests. Ellie, finding the curious liquids and semi-solids fascinating, if strange, tasted them with an interested professional curiosity, wondering how they were prepared.

It was not long before Hard Frobisher nodded to Destry, and the boy rose and began taking dishes from the table. Frobisher pushed back his chair and turned to Brian. "We can now discuss your problem, if you wish," he said pleasantly. "Full stomachs make wise decisions." He glanced at Ellie, smiling. "I regret that there is no

woman in my house to entertain you while we talk, young lady," he said regretfully, and Ellie dropped her eyes. On the *Homeward*—as on Terra Two—men and women were equals and neither deferred to the other. Hard's polite deference was new, and his bland assumption that she could have no part in their talk was a somewhat distasteful surprise. Langdon clenched his fists, while Brian seemed about to explode. Ellie summed up the situation at a glance, and swiftly intervened by rising and glancing shyly at Destry. "Can I help you?" she offered diffidently, the boy grinned.

"Sure, come ahead," he told her. "You carry the dishes and I'll bring the kettle."

Frobisher settled back, taking a leather pouch from his pocket and meticulously stuffing a pipe of carved amber which swiftly revised Langdon's ideas of the present level of civilization. Smoking was a habit on Terra Two as well; only the smell of the tobacco was unfamiliar. Both young men stifled coughs and refused his offer of the sack, taking out their own greyish cigarettes and inhaling the sweetish-sour smoke avidly to shut out the rank stench of the pipe. Somewhere, behind closed doors, they heard a splashing of water and the uncertain falsetto of the boy's voice, mingled with Ellie's merry soprano laughter. Brian scowled and leaned forward, his arms on his knees.

"See here, Mr. Frobisher," he said truculently. "I know you are trying to be hospitable, but if you don't mind, let's talk business. We have to bring the ship down, and after that—" He stopped and stared at the floor, wondering suddenly if he were on some kind of reservation for half-wits. No: the room was tastefully, if simply, furnished; everything was plain, but nothing crude. The wood of the furniture was beautifully stained and polished, and the hand-woven rug on the floor matched the thick draperies at the slatted windows. The house showed comfort, even a moderated luxury, and Frobisher's accents were those of a cultured man. Nor was he merely an eccentric, judging from what Brian had briefly seen of the other houses and the glimpsed people. Destry hadn't seemed surprised at the plane—he'd known what it was, and yet it hadn't impressed him. No, it wasn't savagery. But it was radically different from what he had expected, and the change bewildered him. He looked up at one of the many pictures which hung about the room, and there, for the first time, sensed a note of eccentricity; they were mostly sketches of birds, very precisely drawn, but the colours were combined in a fashion which only a madman could endure. . . . Then Brian realized that it was this bright, unfamiliar light which made the colours bizarre to him, and simultaneously he became conscious that his eyes were stinging and watering,

and that he had a violent headache. He rested his forehead on his clenched hands, closing his eyes.

"It isn't that you aren't welcome here," Frobisher said thoughtfully, pulling at his pipe. "We realize that there is only one reason why you would leave your home planet, and that would, of course, be because you were unhappy there. And so we understand—"

"Of all the stupid, unjustified assumptions—" Brian began furiously, then checked himself. What was happening to his caution? He and Langdon were effectively cut off from the rest of the crew; they couldn't afford to get into trouble. He rubbed his aching eyes.

"Sorry, Mr. Frobisher," he said tiredly. "I didn't mean to be offensive."

"No offence taken," Frobisher assured him. "And certainly none was intended by me. Am I mistaken—"

"We came here for one reason," Langdon informed him. "To advance man's knowledge of the world outside the solar system. In other words, to finish what the Firsts started."

"And, judging by appearances—" Brian's voice was bitter "—we've wasted our time!"

"Yes, I'm afraid you have." Something new in Frobisher's voice made both young men look up. "Whether you realize it or not, I am quite aware of your problems, Mr. Kearns. I have read a good deal about the Bar—excuse me, about the past," He tapped his pipe meditatively on a projecting corner of the fireplace. "I suppose it would be impossible for you to return to Centaurus in your lifetimes?"

Brian bit his lip. "In our lifetimes—no, not impossible," he answered, "but in the lifetimes of anyone we had known, assuming that we could *get* back. Our fuel reserves are not great—" He looked questioningly at Frobisher.

"Then I don't quite know what to do with you," the old man said, and there was a genuine personal concern in his voice. And that friendly concern was the last thing needed to bring Brian to critical mass. Ignoring the warning pressure of Langdon's hand on his knee, he stood up.

"Look, Frobisher," he said tensely, "just who in hell gave you the authority to make this decision, anyhow?"

Frobisher's face did not change by a fraction. "Why, you landed in our field and my grandson brought you here."

"So you're just taking responsibility for the whole matter? Do you rule Earth?"

The man's mouth dropped open. "*Do I rule . . .* Ha, ha, ha!" Frobisher leaned back in his chair, holding his sides and rocking

suddenly with uncontrollable laughter. "*Do I rule . . .*" He collapsed into chuckles again, his mirth literally shaking the floor, and the large expansive laughter was so infectious that Langdon finally glanced up with a faint, puzzled grin, and even the worst of Brian's fury began to drain away a little. "I'm sorry," Frobisher said weakly at last, and there were tears in his eyes. "But that—that is the funniest thing I've heard since spring sowing! *Do I . . .* haa, ha, ha. ha! *Wait* until I tell my son—I'm sorry, Mr. Kearns, I can't help it. *Do I rule Earth!*" he chuckled again, "Heaven forbid! I have enough trouble ruling my grandson!" He laughed again, irrepressibly. Brian couldn't see what was so funny and said so.

With an effort, Frobisher controlled his laughter and his eyes sobered—but not much—as he looked at Brian. "You did come to me," he pointed out, "and that makes it my responsibility. I'm not a man to evade responsibility or refuse you hospitality, but frankly I wish you had found somebody else!" A tiny snort of laughter escaped him again. "I can see you'll make trouble here! But if you don't listen to me, you'll only have to find somebody else, and I'm afraid that whoever you found would tell you just about the same thing." He smiled, and the anxious friendliness in his face took the edge from Brian's anger, although annoyed puzzlement remained.

Frobisher added quietly, "There is no reason that Norten village shouldn't have this problem, as well as any other." He stood up. "I expect the remainder of your ship's crew will be anxious about you. Do I assume correctly that you have a communication device?" At Langdon's exasperated nod, Frobisher twitched a loose coat from a peg. "Then why not report to them? We can talk further on the way—you don't mind if I come, do you?"

"No, not at all," Brian said weakly. "Not at all."

IV.

Mindful of Caldwell's words about not getting separated, Brian insisted that Ellie should accompany them back to the pickup. Destry, apparently uninterested, at first refused his grandfather's invitation to join them, then changed his mind. He ran to fetch a warm jacket, but, surprisingly, instead of donning it, he laid it about Ellie's shoulders. "She's cold," he explained briefly to his grandfather, and without waiting for thanks, strode ahead of them, along the road.

The sun was dropping westward, and the light was almost unbearable; Brian's eyes were squinted tight, and Langdon's forehead furrowed in deep-ploughed lines; Ellie held one hand across her forehead, and Brian put his arm around her.

"Headache, darling?" he asked tenderly.

She grimaced. "Will we get used to this light, do you think, or are we going to have to put up with this all along?"

Langdon said wryly, "I suppose the Firsts felt like this under Theta Centauri!"

Ellie smiled faintly. "No one spread out a welcome for them."

Frobisher walked ahead of them, with long, swinging steps, and Brian said in a savage undertone, "I still think this whole thing is an elaborate bluff of some sort. Or else we're on a primitive reservation. The whole world *can't* be like this!"

"Oh, don't be silly," Ellie said wearily, rubbing her aching eyes.

"How could anyone have known that we'd choose to land here?"

Some of the women on the porches called familiarly to Frobisher, and he waved gaily to them in return, but no one paid any attention to the strangers, except for one plump woman, her hair in curly sausages all over her head, who waddled from her steps and toward the road. "I see you have guests, Hard," she called cheerfully. "If your house is too full, mine is empty!"

Frobisher faced around, smiling, "Your hospitality may be required," he said. "There are others, and they have come a long way."

The woman looked at Ellie with a sharp female glance, noting her fair cropped hair, the smooth spun synthetic coverall beneath the boy's jacket, the molded sandals and bare legs. Then she put out a fat warm hand. "Are you planning to settle in our village, my dear?" she asked.

"They haven't decided," Frobisher answered noncommittally, but Ellie said with a shy, impulsive friendliness, "I do hope so!" and squeezed the offered hand.

"Well, I hope so too, dear. It isn't often we have young neighbours," the plump woman replied. "You and your husband" (Ellie blushed at the forthright archaism) "be sure and call on us, now, if you need anything before you get settled." She smiled and waddled back to her doorway.

Langdon said, low-voiced, "It's like being on Terra Two, except that everything—everything—"

Brian said, "There must have been some inconceivable disaster! Culturally, they're a thousand years behind the world when the *Starward* left. Why, even Terra Two is more civilized than they seem to be! Cooking with fire—and these little villages—and the cities empty—"

"Oh, I don't know," Ellie murmured surprisingly. "How do you measure culture? Isn't it possible that they've progressed in ways we don't know anything about? The difference might be in viewpoint."

Brian shook his head stubbornly.

"It's regression," he protested, but Ellie had no time to answer, for they had come within sight of the pickup, and Frobisher dropped back to walk with them.

"There is your plane," he said. "Do you intend to communicate from here, or will you rejoin your spaceship?"

Brian and Langdon looked at one another. "We haven't thought about it," Langdon said at last, "but—Brian—without a spaceport or at least a radio beaming device, how are they going to land?"

Brian frowned. "I don't know much about rockets," he said at last; "the hyperdrives are my job. How much landing room do they need?"

Langdon said, troubled, "Paula and Caldwell, between them, could land the *Homeward* in great-grandfather Kearns's biochemistry lab, if they had to, without breaking a test tube. But they'd have to have a fix. If they land blind, they're apt to set down right on the village." He paused, and clarified, "That is, if they just aim at our general direction from what we transmit here."

"In that case," Brian suggested, "we'd better take up the pickup and rejoin the ship—and hunt up a good big desert to land blind."

"Rejoining the ship would be quite a problem in this light," Ellie said, troubled. "It's going to be dark in less than an hour, I'd say—and I have a feeling that we're going to find ourselves completely night-blind."

Frobisher had considerably withdrawn while they were talking, and Brian snapped, "What's the matter with your brain, Ellie? You can go around to sunward, and match velocities with the *Homeward* there!"

"But then we might not find this place again," Langdon said surprisingly, and Ellie added, "If we go hurtling all around the planet, who knows if we'd find this again?"

"For the love of—who cares?"

"I do," said Langdon firmly. "According to Frobisher, conditions are pretty much the same everywhere, and—I kind of like that old guy, Brian. I like it here. I'd like to land here. Maybe settle down here."

Brian stared. "Are you crazy?"

Langdon said, "Not at all. If we want to look around after the *Homeward* is down, fine—we have the pickup, we can do all the exploring we want to. We've plenty of fuel for the pickup. We're down, let's stay down."

Brian's face lost a little of its self-confidence; it was the first time that any of the crew had ever questioned his judgment, although

many had resented his methods. He shrugged in a sudden futile misery. "I'm outvoted! And anyhow I resigned command when the atomics went on! Settle it with Caldwell by radio!"

He lurched away from them and around toward the other side of the pickup. He heard the staccato bark of the radio inside, but paid no attention until he suddenly became conscious of Ellie, close beside him.

She raised her face, with an affectionate smile. Brian, even distracted by a thousand irritated thoughts, found time to wonder at the new mystery of her fair hair in the golden sun: the red was dimmed out, here, and the short curls seemed a pure, delicate silver; she was very white and fragile in this new light, and Brian reached impulsively to pull her close. She responded eagerly, her arms going around him and her face lifted with a simplicity that he had not quite expected.

"Journey's end," she said gently. "We've waited a long time for this, Brian, even if that electronic calculator was off-beam about what we'd find down here. Kiss me, you idiot."

The strength in his arms was astonishing, and she gave a little cry. "Hey, I'm not used to weighing so much, take it easy—" she protested, laughing, and the laughter trailed away as he bent his head down to hers. She was conscious of the sun in her eyes, of the physical fatigue from unaccustomed exercise, and the dragging feel of too much gravity—Terra Two was a small, light world. There was a crushing urgency in Brian's arms, and he strained her desperately close for a frantic minute, then abruptly pushed her away, his voice roughened.

"Where did Frobisher go? Damn it, Ellie, I need a clear head right now! The way it looks, we'll have the rest of our lives for that kind of thing!"

Hurt, but sensing the plea for help that begged her from behind the facade of his taut control, Ellie swallowed the pain of the personal rejection, and forced herself to think beyond the immediate moment.

"He and Destry went to see how much of the grain had been ruined—"

"Hell, we can pay for the grain. There they come now—" Brian kicked out at a stalk of wheat, a curiously futile movement, and said in an odd, quenched voice, looking at his foot, "It's going to take months for us to get back in shape, after so long in free fall. We're co-ordinated all wrong for so much gravity. Notice the way Frobisher walks? Like he owned the world—" Resentment and envy mingled in his voice, and he stopped, then finished in a surprised tone, "—or as much of it as he wants!"

He said abruptly as the grandfather and grandson joined them, "Mr. Frobisher, we'll be glad to pay for what wheat we ruined."

"I would not have mentioned it," Frobisher said, and for the first time there was something like respect in his voice, "but it shows a good spirit that *you* have mentioned it. I have abundance, and you will have much to do after your crew lands. But if you insist upon payment, you can contribute task-work next season, after you are settled."

Brian was puzzled, but decided not to press the point. Langdon rejoined them, and he asked, "What did Caldwell say?"

"He'll try it, if we'll fix up some kind of radio beam," Langdon responded. "Where do you want us to land, Mr. Frobisher?"

Hard Frobisher began to draw a sketch-map with a long stick in the dirt. "Over that rise—"

"We'll move the pickup over there," Ellie decided, then abruptly proffered the invitation, "Ride over there with us?"

Hard Frobisher looked speculatively at the plane, then toward the horizon. "Oh, it isn't a long walk," he said, but Destry said eagerly, "I believe I'd like it, grandpa."

The old man smiled deprecatingly. "The young are enthusiastic, Miss Wade," he said, almost in apology, "but—very well."

Brian logged another point of bewilderment. Could any educated humans be so trusting? Even on Terra Two, a well-united colony, there was a certain individual wariness, and strangers—how did Frobisher and Destry know they wouldn't be kidnapped?

It was an incredible relief to get back inside the pickup and switch on the familiar crimson light. Destry expressed mild surprise at the lighting, but Frobisher asked no questions and did not seem impressed when the pickup rose straight upward and circled before relanding at the edge of the large barren tract where they were to bring the *Homeward* down. At only one point in the whole manoeuvre did Frobisher show the slightest surprise, and that was when Ellie took the controls; he glanced at Brian, then at Langdon, and then, in frank amazement, at the small slim girl at the controls; but he made no comment.

They landed, and Langdon touched the radio. Brian took it from his hand. "Hello? Hello the *Homeward*? Kearns talking. That you, Tom?"

Tom Mellen's husky voice, very far away, asked thinly, "Was I right about no spaceports?"

"You were." Brian did not elaborate.

"We've got the direction of your beam. But Paula says if we follow it in, we'll land straight on the pickup. And if we don't, how are we

going to hit the spot you've picked out for us?" Tom sounded puzzled. "In the last few seconds of braking, this hulk isn't very easy to steer."

"Hell!" Brian swore. "Hold on a minute!" He explained the situation briefly to Langdon. "I told you so!"

Langdon said grimly, "There's only one way to handle it. Take the fuel out of the pickup—impact would blow it up—move it out where we want to land, and let them land on it. The pickup's expendable. The crew isn't. They'd land hard, but the crew will be in skyhooks, and Caldwell in a crash cockpit. Nobody'll be hurt."

"We're going to need the pickup later," Brian argued stubbornly.

"Well, have you a better idea?" Langdon asked. "If they follow the beam in part way, and try to swerve in the last few seconds, they're apt to miscalculate by a degree or two, and burn up the village."

"I still think we ought to hunt up a good-sized desert," Brian insisted.

Destry interrupted suddenly, in a tone of disgust. "Say, when you want a kingfisher to dive, you throw a hunk of bread where you want him to dive—you don't stand and hold it! If your radio—what is it—beam comes from that," he gestured at the transmitter, "why not just rip that thing out of the plane, fix it to send out a steady signal, and take it out where you want your spaceship to land? It won't hurt the spaceship to land on anything that small, will it?"

Brian stared at the boy in amazement for a minute, and Langdon's mouth dropped open.

"Destry," Ellie said after a brief silence, "you have the makings of a scientist."

"Look," the boy said uncomfortably, "The idea may not be much good, but why insult me?"

"It is good," Langdon interrupted. "I don't know why I didn't think of it myself, except that I'm half-witted in this light! Brian, that's *it*. Ellie, while I send word to Mellen—before I rip this out—get under the seat and find the radio kit; I may have to resolder a few wires. Looks like we'll be in the dark by the time we finish, too; better get out the small lamps. Come on, get busy—" He flipped the switch open. "*Homeward*? Forbes speaking. Tom? Listen, in about twenty minutes we'll have a fix set up—"

Brian and Ellie were struggling to lift the heavy seat; the unaccustomed gravity made it almost impossible to budge. Destry caught one end and heaved it up easily, and Ellie and Brian bent over the equipment stored there. The girl murmured in Brian's ear, "There goes your theory about regression! That kid knew what he was talking about."

Brian snorted. "And used an analogy from natural history! It was obvious enough, knowing the purpose of the radio. If either Langdon or I had been thinking we'd have hit on it."

Ellie did not answer; there seemed no use in making Brian angry again. She went and stood watching Langdon working swiftly and expertly to dismantle and readjust the radio set to emit a self-contained, steady signal. He had to switch on the lights in the pickup before he finished, and before the impromptu homing device was completed, the sun had gone down. As they stood in the doorway of the pickup, Langdon scowled.

"I can't see my hand before my eyes!" he protested, and took one of the small red handlamps Ellie handed him. He looked at it disgustedly. "I can set the signal up with this, yes—but I don't know the lay of the land!" He gestured to the vast empty tract of barren land, and added, "I'll get lost out there, or set it up on a side hill!"

Destry volunteered: "I know this place like my own hand—I'll come along and find you a flat space."

"Need any help?" Brian offered, but Langdon shook his head. "No thanks. No sense in both of us getting tangled up in this murk." He picked up the homing device and, with Destry, moved away across the field which, to Brian and Ellie, was inky-dark, although in actuality it was bathed in clear moonlight. They stood in the door of the pickup, straining their eyes for the reddish, bobbing glimmer of Langdon's light, and Ellie shuddered in the rough warmth of Destry's coat. Brian's arm stole round her in the darkness.

She said tremulously "What would have happened if we'd gone in at Mars!"

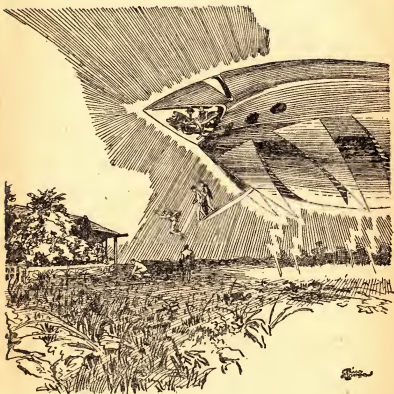
Frobisher, behind them, drew a harsh breath. "You're certainly lucky you didn't!" he said thankfully. "You couldn't have lived there three days, unless you stayed with your ship—I assume the ship is self-contained?"

"Oh, yes," Brian told him. "But—Mars was a sizable colony when the *Starward* left!"

Frobisher shrugged. "Everybody came in from Mars before the spacers stopped running. There's no water there at all now."

Brian murmured, "... and by now you should have had all the planets colonized, and reached most of the nearer stars!"

The older man's voice lost its pleasant inflection. "You say some very surprising things, Mr. Kearns," he said dryly. "You don't say that we *could* have colonized the planets—which, of course, is true—but that we *should* have. Do you mind telling me why? The planets are not exactly suited for human habitation, except this one—and I would hate to have to live on any other."



Brian asked almost savagely "You mean there is *no* space travel?"

"Why, no," Frobisher said slowly. "No one cares to go to the planets."

"But . . . the planets had already been reached, conquered, when the *Starward* left!"

Frobisher shrugged. "The Barbarians did a great many things which we regard as stupid," he said. "But why would it be called conquest, to encourage men to go out to worlds for which they are not biologically adapted? I have read much about the Barbarians, their insatiable egotism, their idle, childish curiosity, their continual escapism and refusal to face their problems, but—forgive me for saying this, no personal offence is intended—I had never believed it until today!"

Ellie took Brian's arm before he could answer. "Look there, Langdon's signalling—they must have the transmitter set up," she said, and moved her lamp in a wide circle. Before long, Langdon and Destry emerged from the bath of inky darkness, and sank down on the ground, in the little flood of reddish light from the pickup's windows. "That did it," Langdon said. "Now we sit and wait while Paula pinpoints the beam, and Caldwell will put her down right where we want."

"I hope somebody remembers to look after Einstein," Ellie worried. "I'd hate to have him break his neck in the last few seconds of the trip!"

"Judy will take care of him," Langdon reassured, and they waited in the red-cast darkness. Brian was mustering all the arguments he had heard from the Firsts about the necessity that had backed developing space travel.

"What about overpopulation? What about diminishing food supplies and natural resources?"

Frobisher's laugh was loud in the darkness. "Certainly not even the Barbarians expected to find natural food supplies on Mars or Venus!" he chuckled. "Interstellar travel might have solved it, but at prohibitive cost. Still, once man decided to stop squandering natural resources on vast theoretical projects, and throwing them irrecoverably out into space, that problem was easily solved."

"But what forced the decision?" Brian asked almost timidly.

"I wouldn't know," Frobisher said thoughtfully, "but when a decision is really necessary, as a rule some one makes it. Probably the overpopulation reached such extremes—the solar system as a whole, of course, since Earth had to feed Mars and Venus too—that for one or two whole generations, every able-bodied man and woman had to put all his efforts into food-making instead of theoretical astronomy

or whatever they called it. And by the time they had that problem solved, people were thinking of science in terms of human benefits, and probably realized that their resources could be handled more efficiently here on Earth. That—I mean thinking in terms of cost and human benefits—did away with war, too. It doesn't take long for attitudes to grow up. Then, too, during the overpopulated generations, the population was almost entirely neurotic. The scientists of that day simply made it possible, I imagine, for women to avoid having the children they didn't want anyway, so that no one had children except the healthy-minded women whose primary interest was in children. The neurotic death-wish in the others effectively reduced the population in only two or three generations. You might say that the neurotics committed race suicide. Is that your ship, or another of Destry's meteors?"

They scrambled down, stumbling in the darkness, as the incredible rocket-roar sounded, and, on a collapsing telescope of fire, the *Homeward* screamed down to its resting place. Brian, standing between Destry and Ellie, wondered—but was too weary and too over-excited to ask—if Destry still regretted his failure to find a meteoer.

V.

Explanations, introductions and much rapid-fire conversation made the landing a babble of noise.

"Hey we're here!"

"Who thought up that homing device?"

"Hey, I'm blind! No light on this planet? Couldn't we have landed to sunward?"

"What, in China?"

"Damned gravity, I can't walk!"

"Ellie!" (More imperatively than the other voices). "Come here and get this devil-ridden cat of yours!"

Ellie dashed to Judy, who was carrying the squirming Einstein as she stumbled, clumsy-footed down the ladder. "Here, take this animal!" she said crossly. "He's pulling my hair out by the roots!" She shoved the thick curls back over her shoulder, and fretted, "Hair's a worse nuisance in gravity than out of it!"

Ellie gently unwound her pet's suckers from Judy's ringlets, and the animal clung to her shoulder, squirming in crazy anticipation, struggling to get to the ground. She climbed the ladder painfully, wondering if she would ever adjust to the heavy gravity again, and, shoving into the lounge, ripped a strip of cloth from her skyhook to

make a leash for the little animal. It was docile, but the prospect of running freely might tempt it to wildness.

As she came down again, she heard Frobisher's rich voice. "I offer the hospitality of our village and my home, for as long as you wish—"

Stumbling on the final rung, Ellie almost fell against Mellen and Paula, standing silently in each other's arms at its foot. Their faces glowed dimly in the reddish shimmer from the open door of the ship, and a pang of envy stabbed through Ellie. They had only one emotion about the landing. They didn't care what they found—they were here, and together. She turned swiftly, not wanting to violate their moment, but Tom looked up at her and smiled with a joyfulness that made his gaunt good-natured face almost handsome. Paula reached out and hugged Ellie, cat and all. "It's all over!" she whispered jubilantly. "We're here!" But her dark eyes were a little sad, too, as she added, "I only wish there was some way we could let—our mothers and fathers—know that we came safely."

"They would be sure of that," Ellie comforted softly.

Tom Mellen scowled. "What's Kearns sounding off about now? Shush, girls—"

Brian was protesting, "Look we can't all go. Some of us ought to stay aboard the *Homeward*. I suggest that we sleep aboard, and visit the village in the morning—"

"You stay if you like," Caldwell said mutinously. "I've seen enough of the *Homeward* for a lifetime!"

Then open rebellion burst out. Little Judy set off the reaction by proclaiming violently, "If I ever go aboard the *Homeward* again, they'll have to carry me and tie me!" and Mellen shouted, "The trip's over and we're private citizens again, Kearns, so stop pulling your rank on us!" In the storm of voices, the Centaurian cat went wild and clawed its way from Ellie's shoulder, tumbling with a queer, staggering gait across the rough dark grass. Ellie screamed, "Catch him, catch him!" and Paula made a grab for the creature, but missed, to trip and fall in the darkness. She lay there, laughing hysterically, watching the cat as it dived into the ring of lights. It stumbled and weaved on its spindly legs, thrusting pouch and tail weirdly to balance against the unfamiliar gravity; it sniffed the grass, with a musical caterwauling, then rolled over and over in the dark grass of the barrens, like a crazy asteroid tumbling in a wildly erratic orbit.

Brian didn't have a chance after that. The *Homeward's* crew, barely more than adolescents, and semi-hysterical anyway with release from strain and the euphoria of journey's end, lay on the grass and rolled and stretched like children, paying less than no attention to Brian's

harangue. By the time Ellie had managed to recapture the staggering Einstein, and the laughter-drunk youngsters had calmed a little, Brian had only one desire: to restore some semblance of dignity to himself and his crew. Livid and all but speechless, he tersely requested Caldwell, the calmest of the group to accept Frobisher's hospitality on behalf of all, and watched, leaning somberly against the ladder, as they trooped away, guided by Destry with a lantern, still laughing wildly at nothing, and hanging on to each other's hands in the darkness to keep from falling.

Hard Frobisher walked steadily toward him, and on an impulse Brian asked him, "Would you like to come aboard?"

Hard answered unexpectedly "Yes, I believe I'd be interested to see the inside of your ship," and followed Brian up the ladder, navigating the rungs with more ease than Brian himself, and into the lounge.

He looked curiously at the skyhooks and the complicated recreation devices, inspected the cabins without much comment, gave an interested hum in the Food Culture department. Finally Brian led him upward, into the enormous cabin where he himself had spent most of the voyage, handling the incredibly complex IS drives.

And here, before the tremendous machinery, Frobisher seemed at last impressed. He broke his silence with a wondering, "And you—you know all about this—this gimcrackery?"

Since the IS drives weighed upwards of a hundred tons, Brian laughed tolerantly at this understatement. "Yes, I'm a drive technician. I spent some time training."

"It must take a lifetime to learn all this!"

Brian condescended, "No, only about twelve years."

"Twelve years!" Frobisher repeated. "Twelve years, and how many—four?—on the way here, wasted on a room full of machines!" And now Brian uncomfortably recognized the emotion in his voice. It was pity. "You poor boy," Frobisher said, and repeated "Poor boy! To waste sixteen years on these metal levers and things! No wonder you are—" He broke off, perhaps aware of the tightness of Brian's clenched jaw.

Brian said in a low and deadly voice, "Oh, don't stop there! No wonder I am—what?"

"Neurotic," Frobisher said quietly. "Of course you must give yourself some reason why you have not wasted your life." And sadly he shook his head. "Fortunately you are still young—"

"This ship," Brian said stiffly, "is the greatest accomplishment of the human race! If I live to be twice your age, I shall never—" Abruptly he rose and flicked a switch. The great dome cleared, and the immense magnifiers brought down the newly blossoming stars so

that the man and boy stood under a vast, blazing galaxy of fire. "Damn it," Brian said huskily and his voice caught. "Man, we brought this little ship across nine light-years of nothing, nothing, *nothing*! We stepped on worlds where no human being had ever been before! You can't make out that that's nothing! It's the biggest thing humanity ever did—and I had the privilege to be part of it—" He was stammering, and, aware of it, he stopped.

Frobisher looked sad and embarrassed. "Poor lad, and what for? What did you, personally, get from it? What good did it do—not you alone—any single human being?"

Brian shouted suddenly, "You senile, half-witted old imbecile, I don't suppose you ever heard of abstract knowledge!"

"It isn't wholly unknown to me," Frobisher said coldly, but added, again with the same anxious friendliness, "Well, my boy, I suppose you believe as you've been taught—but can you show me one single human, now *or* in the past, who was benefited by the trip of the *Starward*, except in his personal vanity? I think, if you carefully examined the matter, you'd find that the building, launching and cost of the *Starward* defrauded quite a large number of people."

Brian said almost desperately, "Individuals don't matter. Knowledge—any knowledge—is for the good of the race as a whole—to lift humanity out of the mud of the sea bottom—toward the stars—"

"I can't breathe such thin air," Frobisher said lightly. "The mud is much more comfortable."

"And where would you be," Brian almost shouted, "if your remote ancestor had never crawled down a tree trunk because he was *comfortable* where he was?"

"Why," Frobisher returned, looking up at the stars that were brilliant in the dome, "I should be very happily scratching myself and swinging by my tail. Do you think the great apes have any ambition to be human? Unfortunately, I've come too far to be happy in a tree-top or a cave. But it seems to me that it's important, for any individual human, to find the absolute minimum with which he can recover that state of effortless happiness he lost when he left the treetops. Do you know what this ship reminds me of?"

"No!" Brian snapped.

"A brontosaurus," Frobisher did not elaborate, and in surly silence Brian snapped a switch. The stars went out.

"Come on," he muttered, "let's get out of here."

Brian slept little that night. At daybreak he stole into the room where the six women of the crew were sleeping, and quietly woke them; one by one, wrapping themselves sleepily in blankets, they tiptoed

into the men's bedroom, where the crew gathered close, listening to Brian's soft, savage whispers.

"Kids, we've got to do something—anything to get away from this madhouse!"

"Go easy, Brian," Mellen interrupted. "That's strong language, and I don't like it. These people aren't crazy, from what we saw and heard last night. They think we're a little off course, though."

Caldwell muttered, "They're probably right. They used to say that being too long in space drove men crazy."

Brian said bitterly, "You all seem insane!"

"I don't blame them," Ellie said unexpectedly. "What *is* the good of going shooting all over the galaxy? It was fine, back in the days when it made people happy, but these people are happy without it."

"Brian's right, of course," said Don Isaacs, a quiet boy who had never grown too friendly with any of the crew except Marcia, and who never had much to say. "But there's this. Let's be practical. We're here. We can't go back to Terra Two. And we can't start reforming them. So let's just make the best of it."

Mellen said shortly, "Good for you, Don. And one more thing: if Kearns keeps shooting off his big mouth, we're apt to land in the local equivalent of the lock-up, for disturbing the peace or something. The peace seems to be valued pretty highly around here."

"But what are we going to do?" Brian wanted to know. "We can't just *live* here, can we?"

"And why not?" Paula's voice was defiant, and Judy murmured, "There aren't as many gadgets and things as there are on Terra Two, but it's certainly a better place than the Ship!"

Mellen pulled Paula's small shadowy form upright beside him. "I don't know why you came on the trip, Brian," he said. "But I came for one reason: because the Firsts trained me for it, and because if I'd begged off, somebody else would have had to. This isn't home, but it's as close to it as we're apt to find. I like it. Paula and I are going to settle down, and build a house or something."

Langdon added, "It's no secret that Judy and I—and Don and Marcia,—” he paused, “and Brian and Ellie too—have been waiting a lot longer than we wanted to wait. There are a couple of hundred people in this village. Nice people, too, I'll bet. I like that old fellow. He reminds me of great-grandpa Wade. Anyhow, that's almost as many as they have on Terra Two. And I'll bet they don't all spend their time knocking themselves out, synthesizing food and exploring and cataloguing the whole planet, either!"

"They certainly don't!" Ellie slid her arm through Brian's. "They are, now, where Terra Two is, without the struggle. They've conquered the planet. They can quit trying."

But Mellen murmured derisively, "Kearns is heartbroken! He wanted to find mechanical computers telling everybody when to spit, and robots doing all the housework!"

"Yes . . ." Brian said thickly. "I guess I did . . ."

He turned his back on them and slammed out.

Ellie thrust her way through the others and ran out into the new day. She plunged her way through the gradually thinning darkness after his retreating shadow, and found him, huddled at the foot of the pickup. She knelt close to him and put her warm hands over his cold ones.

"Brian—oh, my dearest—"

"Ellie, Ellie!" He flung his arms around her, hiding his head against her thin dress. The girl held him tight, without speaking. How young he was, she thought, how very young. He'd started training for this work before he could read. Twelve years, training for the biggest job in the world he knew. And now it all collapsed under him.

Brian said bitterly, "It's the waste, Ellie. Why—we might as well have stayed on Terra Two!"

"That's exactly what Frobisher said," Ellie told him gently. She glanced at the reddening clouds in the east, and such a wave of homesickness wrenched at her that she nearly sobbed.

"Ellie—why?" he insisted. "Why? What makes a culture just stop, go dead, stagnant? They were right on the borders of conquering the whole universe! *What made them stop?*" The agonized earnestness of the question made Ellie's voice very tender.

"Maybe they didn't stop, Brian. Maybe they just progressed in another direction. Space travel was right for the culture we knew—or maybe it wasn't. Remember what the Firsts told us, about the Russo-Venusian War, and the Mars Raids? These people—maybe they've achieved what all cultures were looking for, and never found."

"Utopia!" Brian sneered, and pushed her away.

"No," said Ellie very low, and put her arms about him again. "Arcadia."

"You're just the same, anyway. . . . Ellie, whatever happens, don't *you* leave me too—" he begged.

"I won't," she promised. "Never. Look, Brian, the sun's coming up. We should go back."

"Yeah, big day ahead," he said, and his mouth was too young to twist into such bitter lines. Then it relaxed, and he smiled and pulled her close to him.

"Not just yet . . ."



VI.

Paula and Ellie stood on a knoll, near the abandoned *Homeward*, and watched the skeletal houses going up almost visibly beneath them. "The entire village has turned out!" Paula marvelled. "Our house will be finished before night!"

"I'm glad there was land near the village for us," Ellie murmured. "Don't you feel as if you'd always lived here? And in only four months!"

The dark girl's face was sad. "Ellie, can't you do anything to keep Brian from—from sounding off at Tom? One day Tom will up and paste him one, and then you know what will happen to us!"

Ellie sighed. "And I'd hate to have either of us turned out of the village! It isn't all Brian's fault, Paula—" But then she paused, smiled sadly, and finished "I'm afraid he usually starts it, though. I'll do what I can, of course—"

"Brian is crazy!" Paula said emphatically. "Ellie—is it really true, that you and Brian will go on living in the *Homeward*?" She glanced distastefully at the black mass of the starship, and went on, "Why do you stand for it?"

"I'd live with Brian in a worn-out hydroponics tank, Paula. You would too, if it were Tom," Ellie said wearily. "And Brian's right, some one should keep the ship from being dismantled. Any of you had the same choice."

Paula murmured "I like our house better, especially now—" and she put her head close to Ellie and whispered. Ellie hugged her delightedly, then asked, "Are you feeling all right, Paula?"

The girl hesitated before answering. "I tell myself it's all my imagination," she said at last. "This planet belonged to our ancestors, our race; my body should adapt to it easily. But after being born and growing up on Terra Two where I weighed half what I do here, and then so long in free fall—I know it's hard for all of us, this gravity, but since the baby . . . My body is one damned enormous ache, night and day!"

"You poor thing—" Ellie put an arm around her friend. "And I think I have troubles because my eyes still hurt in this light!"

Judy, heavy-footed, puffed up the slope. She had wound her heavy hair into a coil on her neck, and would have been pretty, in her light synthetic ship's overall, had her eyes been less painfully screwed up against the brilliant sunlight. "The men are hungry!"

"In a minute," Ellie answered, but did not move. She still found it more convenient to prepare food in the culture units of the *Homeward*, but disliked doing so now. However, on occasions such as today,

when the villagers had turned out *en masse*, making a holiday of building the five new houses, it would make it easy to feed almost three hundred.

Langdon and Brian came up the hill, Frobisher striding easily beside them. Langdon squinted at the woman and finally pretended to identify Judy. "You women are getting spoiled," he teased. "On Terra Two, you'd be working along with the men, Judy!"

Judy tossed her head. "I enjoy being spoiled," she said pertly, "and I'll have enough to do, learning what women do here!"

There was a derisive twist in Brian Kearns's smile. "I came off lucky," he commented sourly. "Ellie at least had training for this kind of life. What about you, Paula, are you sorry not to be playing nurse to your electronic calculator?"

Paula gave an eloquent shrug. "The women of the *Starward* chose to be scientists and were chosen *because* they were scientists! I learned navigation because my grandmother learned to fix a cyclotron before she had her babies on Terra Two! I'm shedding no tears."

"Well, suppose you two come and have a lesson in food culture," Ellie admonished, and the three women turned toward the ship. At the foot of the ladder, however, Ellie paused. "Paula, dear, you shouldn't climb these steps now. Go on back, we'll manage by ourselves," she offered gently, and Paula gratefully turned back to rejoin the men.

Meanwhile, Frobisher sat looking down at the rising houses. "Soon you will be part of our village," he commented. "I think you have all done well."

Brian nodded curtly in acknowledgment. He had not been prepared to find the village operating as a self-contained colony, very much like the one at Terra Two—the crew of the *Homeward* had expected to re-enter the complex financial structure of the world the *Starward* had left. But the system seemed simplicity itself. Every man owned as much land as he, alone, was able to work, and owned whatever else he made with his own hands. A man gave his work wherever it was needed, and in return was entitled to take what he needed; food from those who grew it, clothes from those who made them, and so forth. Whatever he needed beyond the necessities of life must be earned by industry, good management and private arrangements. Brian found the system easy and congenial, even enjoying the job he did—a carpenter in Norten had given him work, and Brian, whose training had familiarized him with tools and machinery, had found no trouble in adapting his specialized skills to carpentry and building. There was always building going on somewhere in the village, it seemed. Brian made a good living.

And yet, for all its simplicity, the system seemed remarkably inefficient. Brian said, looking down at the sprawled houses, "I would think it would be easier if you had some kind of central distribution system."

"It's been tried, often," the old man answered patiently. "Every few years, a group of villages will consolidate, to exchange services, or set up communication systems for private individuals, or distribute foods that can't be grown locally, or luxury goods of one kind or another. But that means devising a means of exchange, and keeping account of credits, and so forth. As a rule, the disadvantages are so much greater than the advantages that the consolidation breaks down again within a year or two."

"But there's no law against it?" Brian asked.

"Oh, no!" Frobisher sounded shocked. "What would be the sense of that? The purpose of the whole system is to leave each man as free as possible! Most places are just about like Norten—the maximum of comfort, and the minimum of trouble."

Brian murmured, "I should think, then, that you'd want all kinds of labour-saving devices. You cook with fire— isn't it easier to have food culture units, such as we have on the Ship?"

Frobisher gave the matter grave attention. "Well, a wood fire imparts a fine flavour to food," he remarked. "Most people prefer it. And a cook must take pride in what she cooks, or why cook at all? And, although food culture units may be easier, if one is lazy, for those who use them, no one wants to take the time to manufacture them. One man can build a fireplace in a day, with a neighbour to help, and cook with it for the rest of his life. For a food culture unit, a man would have to spend years in learning to build it, and dozens of skilled and unskilled workers take months to build it; and, in order to make them cheaply enough for one man to buy, millions of them must be made, which means hundreds and thousands of people crowded together, just making them, having no time to grow or cook their own food, or live their own lives. The cost is too high. It's more trouble than it's worth."

Langdon asked him suddenly, "Just what is the population now?"

Frobisher frowned. "You people certainly are full of questions! Who knows? Collectively, people are nothing but statistics, which are no good to anyone. People are individuals. A few years ago, a philosopher in Camey—that's where Destry was born—worked out what he called the critical factor in population: the point where a village becomes too large to be efficient as a self-contained unit, and starts to break down. It's a nice problem, if you're interested in abstract mathematics—which I'm not."

"But I am," Paula said behind them, lowering herself carefully to the grass beside the men. "It sounds interesting."

Frobisher looked at her with fatherly friendliness. "You and Tom can come with me, next time I go to Camey," he invited. "I'll introduce you to Tuck—but all I know is, if a village gets too large, it's more trouble than convenience, and about half the population will go away and start a new one, or move to a smaller place."

"It doesn't sound very workable," Brian said with sour scepticism.

"It works," Frobisher answered equably. "That's the final test of any theory—hullo, here's Tom. We're not lying down on the job, Tom—just waiting for the women to bring dinner."

Mellen thrust a pencilled scrap of paper into Langdon's hands. "Is Judy around? I can't read this—her writing is half Russian and half Arabic!"

"She's in the ship with Kearns's wife," Frobisher answered, not noticing how Paula winced at the word which, on Terra Two, had acquired an ignominious connotation of servitude and sexual inferiority. The three men from the *Homeward* tried to ignore the vulgarity, and Langdon gave a self-conscious laugh, "I think I can translate for you."

"What have you got there?" Brian asked, interested against his will—Judy had been an electrician aboard the *Homeward*, responsible for all lighting circuits, and her work was capable and excellent. He squinted toward the paper. Langdon scowled. "I can't see a thing in this cursed sunlight! What's it supposed to be, Tom?"

"Wiring diagram. There are red bulbs in the *Homeward*, and Judy's going to put lighting in our house—and yours, too. Didn't she tell you?"

"I thought you'd both gone all-out on the primitive life," Brian muttered. Langdon snorted mockingly, and Mellen clenched his fists, then relaxed, with an easy grin.

"It's a free country," he said. Then suddenly he added, "Brian, it's none of my business, but are you and Ellie really going to stick to this damn foolishness? You'll be lonely up here. We could start on a house for you tomorrow."

"Somebody's got to keep the ship from being dismantled," Brian said stiffly. "And that reminds me, if Judy's going to do any wiring, she'd better use spare parts. No more trying to dismantle the drive units!"

Langdon laughed softly, but Mellen's face darkened in annoyance. He said shortly, "You aren't captain any more. The *Homeward* isn't your personal property, Brian."

"I'm aware of that," Brian rasped. "Neither does it belong to the crew collectively. It's being held in trust. And since nobody else has any sense of responsibility, I'm acting as caretaker."

Frobisher looked up as if he were about to speak, but Paula forestalled him, asking gently, "What for? We've no fuel, we'll never take off again."

The nightmare settled down on Brian again. He was fighting—but fighting an intangible, unresisting opponent! If they had been malicious, it would have been easier. They weren't malicious, they were only stupid—unable to understand just why the *Homeward* must be safeguarded as their only link with civilized life. A year or two, he thought grimly, and they'll realize just what I'm doing, and why. Just now, this primitivism is new, novel. But they are basically intelligent, sooner or later they will get tired of this. They can't live from day to day, like the villagers—but how do the villagers live this way? Frobisher's a cultured man. Destry's a bright boy. How can they stand it, living like nice clean animals?

"What deep imponderable are you meditating?" Ellie mocked his serious expression with a gay grimace, and thrust a basket into his hands, loaded with hot food. "Langdon, Paula, Mr. Frobisher—all hands needed to carry food. Here, Destry, you take a basket too," she commanded, handing one to the boy. "Bring this down to the village, now. Dinner is ready. And hurry up before it all gets cold."

Brian absent-mindedly picked up a biscuit-like cake of protein and munched at it as they descended the hill, his mind still halfway circling the continual problem. Ellie offered her basket, in turn, to Destry and Frobisher, and the old man politely took a cake, but Destry shook his head. "Thanks, I don't care for synthetics, Ellie."

"Destry!" His grandfather said with unnecessary sharpness, while Ellie murmured, "I didn't know you'd ever tasted them."

Destry stumbled over a rock in the path and used a couple of unfamiliar expletives; by the time he had picked himself up, retrieved the luckily unhurt basket, and apologized unnecessarily for the words he had used—he might have saved the trouble, for Ellie had never heard them and did not know whether they were sacred or profane—Ellie had forgotten her question for another.

"Have you ever been out of Norten, Destry?"

"Once or twice. I went to Camey with my father, when he went to teach a man there how to weave a rug. He weaves beautiful rugs—much better ones than ours."

"I see," Ellie murmured.

"He wanted me to come with him this time, but one place is pretty much like another, and I had my gardens to look after, so I stayed with grandpa. Besides, I had to—" Destry abruptly stopped. They were nearing the site of the new houses, and he called loudly "Dinner!" and watched the villagers swarm off their scaffolds and beams. He took one of the baskets and scooted away to hand it around.

The food from the *Homeward's* culture units was distributed, and the villagers ate it with polite thanks, but without much enthusiasm; only the children seemed to enjoy the elaborate synthetics, and even the *Homeward's* crew seemed to have lost their taste for it. Brian, sitting on a half-finished wooden step and munching absent-mindedly, abruptly made a face and flung the cake into the grass. Ellie cooked better he decided, without the food machines. She liked the primitive cooking, and he had to admit she did it well. Still he felt disquieted. The food culture units synthesized their food out of raw carbon, water, and almost infinitesimal amounts of raw chemicals; the whole process of *growing* food seemed, to Brian, wasteful and inefficient. It took so much time. Of course, he reflected, it was pleasant, outdoor work, and the people who did it seemed to enjoy it. It wasn't so confining as standing over the machines, and you didn't grow so deathly bored, month after month, with nothing to do except push a lever now and then, and between the lever-pushings, scan films and play endlessly complicated mental games. Brian had been expert at a certain three-dimensional board game which had to be played with the aid of an electronic computation device; now he felt a curiously disloyal thought that his proficiency had been born of boredom. When you enjoyed your work, he thought, you didn't have to invent things to do in your spare time.

But I enjoy my work, he told himself in confusion, I enjoyed working on the IS units.

Didn't I?

Furiously scattering the remaining synthetics on his disposable plate, the crumpled up the bit of plastic and flung it angrily away, grabbing up his tools—the new hammer, plane and level which the village smith had made in exchange for roofing a chicken-house and repairing his cellar steps—and shouted to Caldwell.

"Come on, let's get back at work, I want to get this floor laid by sundown!" He walked catlike across the empty beams, squatted where he had left off, and began sliding boards into place and nailing them with fierce, angrily precise blows.

VII.

He was still tersely angry and short-worded when, a few weeks later, he walked down through the village, a box in his hands. The houses were completed now, even to the steps, although still scantily furnished—Brian was still working, after each day's work, helping Caldwell build furniture.

He turned in at one still-raw, trampled muddy lawn, where brief spikes of summer grass were just beginning to peep through the wet earth, and knocked roughly.

Paula, a loose hand-woven smock wrapped about her body—she was beginning to grow clumsy and heavy now—opened the door, and her squinted, drawn face relaxed suddenly in a quick impulsive smile which made Brian feel ashamed and almost defensive.

"Brian—yes, Ellie's here, but—" She paused, hesitant, then invited shyly, "Won't you come in for a few minutes? We don't see much of you."

"I came down to see Tom—" Brian said uneasily, and followed Paula into the large reddish-lighted room. Before the fireplace he saw, to his intense dismay, that not only Ellie was there with Tom Mellen, but Langdon and Judy, Marcia and Don Isaacs, Destry, and—Hard Frobisher. Frobisher! It seemed that Hard Frobisher was continually underfoot, as if the crew of the *Homeward* needed his continual surveillance, assistance, advice! Brian frowned in annoyance; Frobisher acted like a self-appointed guardian to the newcomers. Yet it was impossible not to like the old fellow, even when he inquired genially, "And what have you in the big, interesting box, Mr. Kearns?"

"Just more of our top-heavy science," Brian said rudely, and, undoing the box, took from it several pairs of red-lensed glasses in bent-plastic frames. He handed one pair to Mellen and donned one himself. "Turn out these lights, and see if these help any in the sun, will you?"

Tom looked at the glasses, puzzled, for a moment, then hooked the frames behind his ears and switched out the red lights, stepping to the west door and looking into the setting sun. Then he turned, grinning.

"They work, all right! What did you do, Brian? Just red glass wouldn't work—remember, we tried it?"

Brian shrugged. "There's a polarized layer inside. I couldn't find selenium, so I used an oxide of gold for the red colour. It's a thin quartz filter . . . oh, never mind. I'd have had them before, but it took a damned long time to grind them."

Langdon took a pair from the box. "That's right," he said slowly. "I remember, Miguel Kearns made lenses for some of the old *Star-*

ward instruments, when they broke, and when we were duplicating instruments for the trip. Did you help him?"

"Some," Brian returned. He met Frobisher's eyes, and said truculently, "So you have no use for science. Well, as you pointed out yourself, it's a free country, and my crew have been going around with sore eyes—and I don't like it!"

Paula's strained face relaxed as she slipped the filter glasses over her eyes, and she smiled. "This is wonderful, Brian," she said, and Ellie's face glowed with pride. Langdon mocked in a friendly voice, "The old fellow's human after all!" and flung a companionable arm round Brian's shoulders. "When are you and Ellie going to come down off your lofty peak and live with the rest of the pack?"

Brian stiffened, but the tone of approbation warmed him, and he came back, half-unwilling, to the fireplace, and listened to Frobisher, who said, laughing faintly, "It isn't science itself we don't like. It's the use of science as an end in itself, rather than a means. I mentioned a brontosaurus. I assume you know what that is?"

"We had them, alive, on Terra Two—or something like them. They're big, but not dangerous—they're too dumb." Brian told him.

"Exactly," Frobisher said. "But they're not much good to themselves, are they?" He smiled; then his face sobered. "The brontosaurus, with his titanic body-mass, had outgrown the logical use of a development which had, originally, been good and useful. Science," he proceeded, "was developed to make life easier for man. The individual man. The light body-armour of the Barbarian soldier was developed to guard him against the simple weapons of his enemies. But it spurred on the development of more formidable weapons, and finally the armour had to be so cumbersome that the armoured man must be lifted on his horse with a derrick. And if he fell down—well, there he was. It helped along the army, as a unit—but it certainly made life a mess, for the individual. And science gave so much time and thought to units—the Nation, the Race, Humanity-as-a-whole—that it laid terrific burdens on humanity as individuals. To benefit the monster of Humanity-as-a-whole, they even fought wars—which killed off humanity, individually, at a fearful rate. Eventually—well, the knight fell down inside his armour, and couldn't get up again. I think the collapse started even before the *Starward* left. The brontosaurus died along with his protective nuisances, but nature was a little kinder to men—individually. Humanity-as-a-Whole died out pretty thoroughly, even as a concept. The individuals who were left knew enough not to start the whole dreary process all over again. Science took its rightful place with the other arts and crafts—instead of using

it to serve a hypothetical whole, we use each art, or science, to enrich the personal, private life of each individual." He gestured around the room. "The sawmill and pottery. Tom's red lighting in here. And—your red-lensed glasses, Brian. I think the time has come when I can tell you why—"

But Brian had already risen, and flung away from him.

"I didn't come down here to be lectured!" he shouted at Frobisher, and strode to the door. "There are the glasses, Tom. You hand them out. Tell everybody not to break them; they take forever to grind."

The door slammed behind him.

Now that he had defied Frobisher, he felt a little better, but as the days came and went, he felt tormented by the uselessness of his life. He spent more and more time in vicious, expert hammering and sawing—in solitude, now—at furniture, finding a sort of satisfaction in substituting physical activity for insoluble mental problems; Ellie never dared to broach the subject of moving away from the *Homeward* again, until one night when Brian was sitting hunched over in the former lounge, listlessly watching Einstein clamber around the axis beams. The Centaurian cat's suckers were not strong enough to support his weight, in this gravity; he had developed a queer shambling gait on his hind feet, amusing to watch, but clumsy and painful, and Ellie picked up her pet and patted him as she passed through the lounge.

"Poor Einstein doesn't know what to make of this," she observed. "Gravity, in here where there ought to be no gravity at all. He'd be happier in a regular house."

"I suppose so," Brian said sourly. "I suppose you would, too. But look, Ellie; the crew would dismantle the ship inside a year or two."

"Well, why not let them?" Ellie asked, matter-of-factly.

Brian shrugged helplessly. "I suppose, sooner or later—but still, some day Terra Two will go out into space again, too—they haven't reverted to savagery!"

Ellie only smiled. "It won't happen in our lifetime."

"You're worse than the others!" Brian shouted in sudden furious anger. She only murmured uncritically, "Come in and have dinner."

Brian morosely rose and followed her. He had to edge by a machine, suddenly stumbled over Einstein and exploded violently "It's too damn cramped in here!"

Ellie did not answer, and Brian finally said, "I suppose—it won't happen in our lifetime, no."

"What are you going to do then, pass this great secret on to your sons?" Ellie inquired, and Brian started to answer before apprehending the dry irony in her voice. It had taken him twelve years to learn even the basis of interstellar operation.

He applied himself grimly to his food; but his mood softened as he ate, and he finally looked up and said, "Frobisher can like it or not, but I'll make a scientist out of Destry yet. The kid's always underfoot. Ever since you taught me to fly the pickup—I took him up one day, and let him take the controls for a few minutes; they aren't very complicated." He spoke with a sort of satisfaction; it was a point of self-respect in his continual struggle to maintain himself in Frobisher's presence. "The boy's nuts on airplanes. He must have read a lot in old books."

Ellie asked suddenly, "I wonder what Destry's father is like?"

Brian scoffed, "He makes rugs!"

Ellie looked unconvinced. "Maybe he makes rugs the way Frobisher paints those birds he has all over the house. Look what I found in Frobisher's bookcase. Destry loaned it to me when I asked him." She handed him a book, nicely hand-bound in red cloth. Brian opened it curiously, skipping over the name—John D. Frobisher—penned neatly on the cover. He had seen few books in Norten village, and those were mostly blank-books filled with recipes, musical notations, or diaries—diary-keeping was a favourite pastime among young people here. But this was printed, and filled with elaborate, exquisitely reproduced diagrams which reminded Brian of Judy's scrawls when she was working out a wiring diagram. He tried to read a page or two, but, although the language was only loosely technical, Brian's education had been so rigidly specialized that the vocabulary was beyond him. He shut it up, and asked, "Did you show this to Judy?"

"Yes. It's a text, she says, on radio and radar, and not an elementary one either."

"Funny . . ." Brian mused.

"Here's something funnier," Ellie said. "Have you seen Caldwell lately? Or Marcia and Don Isaacs?"

"Come to think of it, I haven't. I never saw much of Don, though."

"They went away, that night you and Frobisher had a fight. Marcia told me they were going so that Don could work in another village. That's what they always say—like Destry's father. People seem to come and go, here, all the time! Almost every day, somebody picks up a clean shirt and a pair of stockings, and walks off down the road. And nobody sees him again for three or four months—then he walks in again, as casually as I do when I go down to Paula's and back!"

"And the standard of living . . ." Brian mused "comfortable enough—but primitive—"

Ellie laughed. "Oh, Brian! We were happy enough on Terra Two, without quite so much. The ship is super-mechanized. We're spoiled—we've developed a lot of artificial wants—"

"Frobisher converting you, too?" he asked glumly.

Her laugh was gay. "Maybe."

Brian was silent, staring at the book. He felt trapped. It was an insidious poison, the temptation to relax, rest, dream, and die in this—Ellie had called it Arcadia, but a fragment of poetry from an old book in the ship's library teased his brain; not Arcadia, he thought drearily, but the isle of the lotus eaters, who tasted the poison flower and forgot all that they had been before . . .

The words of the ancient poem sang insidiously in his brain. He rose and fetched the book from behind a panel in the lounge, and sat with it on his knees, the words of defeat staring him in the face.

Hateful is the dark-blue sky,
Vaulted o'er the dark-blue sea;
Death is the end of life; ah, why
Should life all labour be?

Let us alone; Time driveth onward fast . . .

How could a man who had mastered space live like this, in animal content, year after year? He wondered if among the lotus eaters there had been anyone who had refused the poison—and finally eaten it from starvation, or because he could not endure the loneliness of being the only sane man among a crew abandoned to their dreams

Let us alone . . . what pleasure can we have
To war with evil? Is there any peace
In ever climbing up the climbing wave?
Give us long rest or death, dark death or dreamful
ease

Brian scowled and let the book fall to the floor. There was nothing easy about life in Norten! In the last few days, weeks, months, he had worked harder than ever in his life. His hands, once sensitive and smooth, alert to the quiver of a lever, were hard and calloused and brown. And yet there was something satisfying about it. He no longer found himself inventing elaborate leisure-time pursuits, no longer felt impelled by continual anxiety about his crew, lest some minor infringement of a rule should lead to catastrophe. And Ellie—he had Ellie, and that, if nothing else, was something to hold him here.

And yet—after he had crossed space—his body thrived, but his brain was starving. Or was it, he asked himself. He'd got almost as much satisfaction—the guilty thought came—out of seeing his crew's

eyes get well again, with the special glasses he'd made, as he had had in piloting the *Homeward* safely through a dangerous cloud of radioactive gas. Maybe—again the guilt—maybe more.

The glasses. But they couldn't go around wearing red goggles for the rest of their lives. There ought to be some way of gradually altering the filters, maybe at monthly intervals, so that they became gradually accustomed to the light. He pulled a stylus toward him, vainly rummaged for a loose sheet of paper, then irritably climbed into his old control room, searched, and at last slid open the moving panel over the log book. His hands hesitated at the vandalism, then he shrugged, and swore—the voyage was finished, the log book closed out! He ripped a blank sheet from the back, sat down then and there on the edge of the skyhook, and began to sketch out, roughly, a plan for glasses with changeable filters.

The yellow dawn was a glare in the sky when he finally came down; Ellie was sleeping in the cabin, her curly hair scattered over her face, and he quietly tiptoed past her and down the ladder. The air was cold and clear, and he stretched and yawned, suddenly realizing that he was very sleepy.

Against the brightening sky, a man's form was silhouetted as he gradually came over the knoll, and Tom Mellen called to him, "Is that you, Brian?" and came toward him with swinging strides. He had long ago discarded the shorts and sandals of the ship in favour of boots and long dyed breeches, and he wore one of his uniform shirts tucked into them. The ship's synthetics were not long-wearing or practical, although they were simply produced, but a few of the younger women in Norten had liked the thin pretty stuff, and exchanged lengths of it for the sturdier and more practical handmade variety.

As he came nearer, Brian asked him, "Where are you going so early?"

"I'm going to work awhile in another town," Tom told him casually. "I've a letter to a friend of Frobisher's. I came up to ask a favour. I don't suppose Ellie's up yet? Well, don't bother her, but—" He paused, then added, "I meant for Paula to come along with me. But she's not very well, and she doesn't want to be with strangers. She'd particularly miss Ellie. But I hate to have her alone—"

Brian said abruptly, "Tom, we're going to move down into the village. I've—" He glanced around at the *Homeward* and all his pent-up resentment suddenly spilled over and he shouted, "I'm tired of caretaking the damned old—brontosaurus! I'm through!"

Tom whistled. "What's got into you? I thought you were dedicated to maintaining a nice snug little island of culture." Then at

Brian's expression, the sarcasm left his voice, and he said eagerly, "Brian, if you mean that, why don't you and Ellie move down with Paula while I'm gone? I'll be back before the baby comes, and we can get started on a house for you two."

Brian stood thinking it over for a minute, and finally nodded. "All right. I'm sure Ellie will want to; she worries about Paula."

Tom stood looking at the ground. "Well, I'll shove along and tell Paula to expect you, and then I'll get on my way." He paused, then said, low-voiced, "Brian—I thought, on the ship, you were just throwing your rank about—well, about the girls. But now—" He stopped again, and said finally, embarrassed, "You know the baby was—started—before we landed?"

"I guessed that," Brian said coldly.

"I thought it was all right because we'd be landing within a month or two. But now—and the change in gravity, I'm afraid—if Paula and I had had sense to wait—Judy's pregnant, you know, and she's not having any trouble at all, while Paula—" He stopped, and finally got out, "I guess I owe you an apology, Brian."

"You might better apologize to Paula," Brian said, but he had appreciated the spirit in which Tom spoke. So Tom finally realized that Brian had a good reason for what he'd done!

Tom added quietly, "I owe an apology for something else, too, Brian. It's my fault they've been leaving you out of things around here. I had the idea you were still trying to rehabilitate the natives."

"Don't bother apologizing," Brian said frigidly. So Tom had missed the point after all! "I'm not particularly interested in 'things around here,' and sooner or later I expect the natives will need rehabilitating, as you put it. When that day comes, I'll be here."

Mellen's mouth hardened. "I guess Frobisher's right about you!" he said tightly. "So long, then." He put out his hand, rather unwillingly, and Brian shook it, without enthusiasm. He watched as Tom descended the hill, wondering where he was going and why. Was it just part of the local irresponsibility? Tom was irresponsible anyhow—the way he'd behaved toward Paula was shameful. And who, here, was going to look after her? The local witch-doctor? He scowled, and went in to tell Ellie about their impending move.

VIII.

Paula was almost pathetically grateful for Ellie's company, and even Einstein settled down near the new fireplace as cozily as any of the ordinary Norton cats with whom he had a continual feud. Brian located a site for the house he intended to build and, aided by Destry,

began a rough workshop of fieldstone. In return for the boy's help, Brian took him, nightly, into the dome of the *Homeward* and taught him the names and positions of the fixed stars. The boy was filling a blank-book with astronomical data; Brian offered to present him with one of the astronomy texts duplicated in the ship, but Destry politely refused the gift. "I like to make my own. That way I'm sure of what's in it," he explained.

Brian was himself painstakingly perfecting his lens-grinding equipment. The workshop had gradually become his refuge, and, now that he knew he was working on something which was worth doing, he slowly began to come out of the closed shell he had originally thrown about himself, forbidding intimacy with the life of the village. He relaxed from the painstaking lens-grinding by beginning something he had not done since his early teens: glass-blowing. He made a set of fancy bottles for Ellie, and when Judy admired them, made one for her as well. Both Ellie and Judy had many friends in the village, and within a few weeks Brian found that so many men and women were asking him to make them that he could switch his full-time work from carpentry to glass-making. There was a potter in the village, who made extremely fine crockery, but at present the local glass-maker was—again the omnipresent phrase—"working in another village." Brian found the work congenial, and felt that he had approval.

However, privately, anxiety piled on anxiety. He actually saw very little of Paula, for there was still a certain stiffness between them; however, he felt disturbed at her obvious weakness. Ellie, too, was expecting a child by now, although as yet she had told no one but him, and Paula's condition filled him with panic for Ellie.

There had not been a medical man on the *Homeward*: none of them had ever been ill. Marcia had nominally been responsible for their health, but even Marcia wasn't here now. And judging from what little talk Brian had heard here in Norten, it was simply a matter of any woman's helping out when asked. Ellie had vigorously defended the system when Brian attacked it, protesting that having children was a natural function, and that the medical and surgical atmosphere with which the Terra Two colony surrounded it was enough to make any woman neurotic. Brian was unconvinced; that might be true when everything was normal, but Paula definitely needed care. He wondered how Ellie could be so unconcerned; Paula was her closest friend.

But even Brian was not prepared for the suddenness with which mere anxiety turned to disaster. At noon that day Paula was her usual self: pale and pathetically heavy of step, but gay and bright-eyed. In the evening she was quieter than usual, and went to bed early. And

some time during the night Brian was roused by Ellie's hand on his shoulder and her scared voice: "Brian—*wake up!*"

Brian drew himself upright, instantly alert, seeing Ellie's tensely drawn face and hearing the near-hysteria in her voice. "It's Paula—I've never seen anything like it—she was all right this evening—oh, Brian, please come!"

Brian pulled a robe about his shoulders, thinking, what could have happened so suddenly? He heard the low, incessant moans even before he stepped into the inner room and stopped, aghast at Paula's face. It was altogether drained of colour; even the lips were white and sunken, but a curious dark line marred their edges. She had always been excessively thin, but now her hands seemed suddenly shrunken into claws, and when Brian touched one, it was fire-hot. Brian cast his mind rapidly over what little he had been taught about the relationship of gravity and pregnancy—just enough to know that in free fall, a dangerous condition could develop suddenly. He wished he had known more, but they had taught him just enough that he was thoroughly convinced of the wisdom of enforcing strict celibacy in spaceship personnel. His brain, strictly specialized for one limited aspect of science, retained only a few fragments of knowledge. They fluttered and teased at the edge of his mind: imperfect placental junction without the cohesive effect of gravity, hormone malfunction under the added strain of pregnancy, extensive damage to internal tissues—all this was at free fall conditions. But what about Paula, who was adapted to the light gravity of Terra Two, whose child had actually been conceived in free fall, and who was being brutally punished by the dragging gravity of Earth? Something in the delicate balance of cohesions had evidently kicked loose. Brian looked down at the unconscious girl and spoke violently.

"*Damn Mellen for an insubordinate idiot!*"

"Where's Tom?" Paula whispered rackingly. "I want Tom!" The feverish bony fingers clutched at Brian's, and she begged "I want Tom!" Her eyes opened, but she was looking past Brian into space. Brian felt the old cold anger knotting inside him. He bent over and promised quietly, "I'll get him."

Ellie whispered, "But—I don't know where he's gone, Brian. Paula might be—"

Brian straightened savagely. "I'll find him if I have to take my fists to Frobisher! Thank God we still have the pickup! And I'll find out where Don and Marcia were sent; yes, *sent!* All along I've had the feeling—"

"Brian—" Ellie caught at his hand, but he pushed her away. "Frobisher's going to listen to *me* for once! He can damn science all he wants to. But if Paula dies on our hands because nobody on this dark-ages planet knows what to do for her, then by the living God I'm going to personally raise such hell in this godforsaken little Utopia of theirs that Frobisher and his pals will snap out of their daydream and start living like human beings again!" Without another word he strode out of the room, dressed hastily and went out of the house, his long-repressed anger boiling up and stiffening his back as he hurried toward the village. He went up Frobisher's steps and across his porch at a single bound, thrust the door open without knocking, and stormed inside.

"Frobisher!" he bellowed unceremoniously.

In the darkness there was a surprised noise, then steps, a door flung open and a light shining in Brian's eyes—and Hard Frobisher, half-dressed, came swiftly into the main room. Another opening door showed the half-naked Destry, surprised and angry. Frobisher's face, dim in the firelight, was surprised, too, but there was no anger, and he asked calmly, "Is something wrong?"

And as always, his calm brought Brian's anger to the exploding point. "You're right there's something wrong," he raged, and advanced on Frobisher so violently that the old man retreated a step or two. "I've got a girl on my hands who looks as if she were going to die," Brian roared, "And I want to know where on this devil-ridden planet you packed Tom off to, and where Marcia's gone! And then I want to know if there's a decent medical man anywhere in this damned backward dark-ages Utopia of yours!"

Frobisher's face swiftly lost its calm.

"Tom's wife?"

"And there's no need to talk smut!" Brian shouted, "Paula!"

"Paula Sandoval, then, if you like it better. What's the trouble?"

"I doubt if you'd understand," Brian snapped, but Frobisher said steadily, "I suppose it's the gravity sickness. Tom mentioned it before he left. It's easy to get hold of him. Destry—" He turned to the boy in the doorway. "Quick, go down and get the Center on the wire. Tell them to fly Mellen back here, inside an hour if they can. And—where's your father, Destry? This sounds like something for him."

Destry had disappeared inside his room while his grandfather was talking; almost instantly he came out again, stuffing his shirt into trousers. "He was in the Marilla Center last week, too," Destry said quickly, "but he's in Slayton now. And there's no regular transit

plane there. Hey, Mr. Kearns—" He turned quickly to Brian. "You can fly the *Homeward's* plane now, can't you? Or shall we get Langdon? They'll fly Tom in from the Marilla Center, but we'll have to fly over and pick up my father."

"What the—what the *hell*—!" Brian started, but Destry was already hurrying down a flight of stairs. Hard Frobisher put a compulsive hand on Brian's shoulder and shoved him after the boy. Brian stumbled on the steps and blinked in the raw light of an electric arc-bulb. On a rough wood workbench, with Destry's notebooks and a with Destry's notebooks, and a few ordinary boy-type oddments, the stupefied Brian recognized what was unmistakably a radio transmitter. And not a simple one. Destry was already adjusting earphones and making a careful calibration of an instrument which looked handmade but incredibly delicate. He moved a key and said in a hurried voice, "Marilla Center, please, second-class priority, personal. Hello—Betty? You've got a man in the Center working on radio? Mellen? That's the man. This is Destry Frobisher talking from Norten. Fly him over here—as fast as you can make it. His wife's ill—yes, I know, but it's a special case. Thanks—" A long pause. "Thanks again, but we'll manage. Look, Betty, I have to get Slayton. Clear the stations, will you?" Another pause, and he said, "My father. Why? Oh—thanks, Betty, thanks a lot. Tell them we'll bring a plane over there for him." He closed the key and ripped off the headphone, standing up, and Brian exploded again.

"Just what's going on?" he demanded. "*What kind of a bluff have you people been putting up on us?*"

"No bluff," Frobisher said calmly. "I've told you, all along, that we use science, in its proper place. I've tried to tell you, two or three times, but you always shouted at me and shut me up before I could explain. Tom Mellen has been working in one of the Centers for a month. Didn't you wonder why he wasn't worried about leaving Paula, in her state of health? He's known that if any serious complication developed, he'd be sent for right away." He turned and started toward the stairs. "Don't you realize this is the first time you've ever shown the slightest *personal* concern for anyone or anything? Before this, you've been concerned with scientific accomplishments for their own sake. Now look, you can stand here staring like a brainless fool, or you can come with me to the Center to fetch my son—Destry's father—who is one of the most skillful medical men in this section." As Brian stood stone-still, unable to move before the onslaught of ideas, Frobisher urgently took his arm. "Snap out of it!" he commanded harshly. "I *can* fly a plane, but I would hate to have to manage that jet of yours! And I'll have to come with you, because

you don't know the way ! Destry, you stay close to the radio, just in case," he added.

Brian, too dazed to speak, stumbled with him across the dark fields toward the pickup, but by the time they reached it, his reactions were in operable condition; he climbed in at the controls, advised Frobisher to fasten a safety strap, put the pickup in the air, and listened intelligently to Frobisher's instructions for reaching the place he called Slayton Center. Then he turned his head.

"Look," he said grimly, "I'm a little stunned. Just what has been going on ?"

Frobisher looked equally puzzled. "What do you mean ?"

"All this—"

"Oh, this !" Frobisher dismissed it with a shrug. "You had fire extinguishers on your spaceship, I remember. Did you keep them out on your dinner tables, or did you leave them out of sight until they were needed in a hurry ?"

"I mean—you let me go on thinking that people here didn't know much about science—"

"Listen, Kearns," Frobisher said abruptly, "you've been jumping to conclusions all along. Now don't jump to another one, that we've been bluffing, and concealing our civilization from you. We live the way we like to live."

"But—radio—planes—you have all those things, and yet—"

Frobisher said, with barely concealed disgust. "You have the Barbarian viewpoint, I see. Radio, for instance. We use it for emergency needs. The Barbarians used to listen to keep from doing things—I know, they even had radio with pictures, and used to sit and listen and look at other people doing things instead of doing them themselves. Of course, they had rather primitive lives—"

"Primitive !" Brian interrupted. "You have airplanes, and yet people walk—"

Frobisher said irritably, "Why not ? Where is there to go in such a hurry—as long as we have fast transport for those few times when it is really necessary ?"

"But even when the *Starward* left, each man had his own private 'copter—"

"Private baby carriage !" Frobisher snorted. "When I go anywhere, I go on my feet like a man ! Stupid, primitive Barbarians, living huddled in cities like big mechanical caves, never seeing the world they lived in, hidden away behind glass and steel and seeing their world on television screens and through airplane windows ! And to make all those things they had to live huddled in their caves and do dirty smelly jobs with metal nuts and bolts, and never see what they

were doing, never have any pride or skill—they lived like dirty animals ! And what for ? Mass men for mass production—to produce things they didn't need, to have money to buy other things they didn't need ! Top-heavy brontosaurus ! Who wants to live that way, or do that kind of work ? There are a few craftsmen who build airplanes, or design them, because that's what they would rather do, and they'd be unhappy if they couldn't. They're artisans. And we can always use a *few* planes. But there aren't many, so we keep the planes for necessary work. And most people like doing simpler things, things with personal satisfaction. We don't force them to mass-produce airplanes simply because it's possible !” He checked his vehemence with an almost apologetic cough. “I didn't mean to get angry—that's the Slayton Center down there. You can land inside that rectangle of lights.”

Brian set the pickup down easily—it seemed to be rolling over a velvety carpet—and they got down and walked, in silence, across the darkly luxuriant grass, toward a low frame building of dark wood. Inside, by the warm glow of a fireplace, a man sat at a large table, lighted by an expertly rigged system of miniature spotlights, looking down at what appeared to be a large relief map. A headphone was on his ears; he glanced up as they came through the door, but motioned them into silence, listening intently, and after a moment groped blindly into a box fixed on the side of the desk and came out with a large black pin which he stabbed accurately into the relief map. “Tornado reported between Camey and Marilla. All right, then, ring off and send Robinson up to put a bomb in the centre of it before it hits the farms out that way,” He replaced the headphone, and inquired courteously, “What can I do for you gentlemen ?”

“Hello, Halleck,” Hard Frobisher said, and, advancing to the desk, shook hands with the man. “This is Brian Kearns—came in from space.”

“Oh, are they still coming in, down your way ? The last one we had here was in my grandfather's time,” the man Halleck observed casually. “No, come to think of it, down there in Marilla they have a man called Mellen, been working the weather station. Do you know him, Mr. Kearns ? I'm glad to meet you.”

Brian murmured something noncommittal, and looked around, dazed. Halleck added, “I suppose you came to pick up Dr. Frobisher ? He's on his way over. Won't you sit down ?”

“Thanks.” Frobisher sank down in a comfortable armchair, motioned Brian into another. The man at the desk hung up his headset and came to stand by Frobisher's chair. “Good to see you, Hard. When do you come up here again ?”

"Not for a month or so. You'll be off by then?"

"I should say so! I've a couple of good cows calving, and I want to be home."

"Those blacks?" Frobisher asked. "Drive a few through Norten some day, and we'll see if we can't make a deal. I could use a good bull, and there are some new families with children, could use a milk cow."

Brian didn't try to follow the conversation after that; it seemed to be mostly about cows and the luck a mutual friend was having in breeding chickens which laid black-shelled eggs. Frobisher finally took pity on his blank face. "He's never been at a Centre before, Halleck," he told the stranger, who grinned. "Pretty dull, aren't they, Mr. Kearns? I'm always glad to come up here when it's time, but I'm always glad to get back to the farm."

Brian said, "I'm a little stunned at all this—" and added, "I'd understood your—your civilization wasn't scientific—"

"It isn't," Frobisher said sternly. "It definitely is not. We use science; it doesn't use us. Science, Mr. Kearns, is no longer the plaything of powerful warmongers, nor is it enslaved to an artificial standard of living, keyed to an unhealthy, neurotic population who want to be continually amused, rocked in a cradle of overstimulation! It is not a plaything for pressure groups, so-called educators, fanatics, adolescents, egocentric exhibitionists, or lazy women! Men are no longer under pressure to buy the products of commercialized science to create employment and keep the cities running. Anyone who's interested, and who has talents and skills which go beyond day-to-day living, which is more than half of the population, spends a few months every year doing the things which need doing, not just in science. Halleck here knows more about weather conditions than anyone else in the South Plains. About four months out of the year, he sits over there; or works out in a weather plane, fighting tornados before they get started, working on reforestation, handling drought conditions. The rest of the year, he lives like anybody else. Everybody lives an easy, balanced life. Man's a small animal, and has to have a small horizon. There's a definite limit to his horizon, which is why a village breaks down and starts having internal trouble when it gets too big.

"But groups of people, as a whole, have to have some idea of the world over the horizon, if they're going to avoid the development of false ideas, superstitions and fears of strangers. So every man leads a secure, balanced life in the small horizon of his village, where he is responsible for himself, and responsible to every person he knows—and also, if he is capable, he lives a larger life *beyond* the village, working

for others—but still and always for individuals, not for ideals.” Brian opened his mouth to speak but Frobisher quietly forestalled him. “And before he can work in the Centers, he has to prove himself as a responsible individual in the villages. There’s a place waiting for you, Brian. How would you like to teach a course in the mechanics of interstellar space?”

“What?” Brian spluttered. “You mean—space travel?”

Frobisher laughed heartily. He glanced at his watch and said inconsequentially, “My son will probably be here in a few minutes—but still, I’ve time to explain—”

He turned to Brian again. “For two or three months a year,” he reminded him. “There is always a use for knowledge, whether we can use it immediately or not. Our present way of life won’t endure forever. At best it’s an interim device, a probationary period, a sort of resting stage while man returns to sanity before he starts climbing again. Some day, man will probably take to space again, even the stars, but this time, we hope he’ll do it with a sense of perspective, counting the cost and weighing it against individual advantages.” He paused, and added quietly, “I think he will.”

After a long silence, he added, “I’m a historian. Back in the First Renaissance, man was starting to outgrow his atavistic notion about survival of the strong and powerful instead of the best. Then, unluckily for Europe, and also unluckily for the Redmen, the so-called New World was discovered. It’s always easier to escape across a frontier, and drive your misfits out instead of learning to live with your problems. When that frontier was finally conquered, man had a second chance to learn to live with himself and with what he’s done. Instead, after wars and all kinds of trouble, he escaped again, this time to the planets. But he couldn’t escape from himself—and eventually that frontier was filled up to the saturation point, too. So he escaped again, this time by launching the *Starward*—but that time he went just one step too far. And then the crash came. Every man had the choice: die in his armour, or take it off.” He grinned. “I thought for a while, Brian, that you were a brontosaur.”

Brian mopped his forehead. “I feel pretty extinct,” he murmured.

“Well, you can try teaching interstellar mechanics for awhile. The rest of the time—”

“Say—” Brian interrupted anxiously. “I don’t have to start right away, do I? I’m fixing up a new set of lenses for the crew—”

Frobisher laughed, heartily and kindly, and put a hand on his shoulder. “Take your own time, my boy. The stars won’t be bridged again for centuries. It’s a lot more important to get your crew’s eyes

in good condition again." He rose abruptly. "Good—here is John, and I suppose by now, Mellen's on his way to Paula."

Brian quickly got to his feet as a tall dark-haired man in a white jacket came into the room. Even in the dim light the resemblance to Frobisher was obvious; he looked like an older, maturer Destry. Frobisher introduced the men, and Dr. John Frobisher gave Brian's hand a quick, hard shake.

"Glad to meet you, Kearns. Tom Mellen spoke about you, last time I was in Marilla. Shall we be on our way?" As they turned outward; and crossed the lighted airfield, he and his father spoke in low tones, and for once Brian had nothing to say. Even his thoughts were not working as he put the pickup in the air. The reversal had been too fast. Then, abruptly, a memory hit him and he turned his head around to ask sharply, "Listen here, if you can receive radio signals, *how is it that no one answered the Homeward's call from space?*"

Frobisher looked a trifle embarrassed. He said gently, at last, "We use a special, tight-beam transmission. Your signals are the old wide-band ones, and they came in as bursts of static."

For some reason Brian felt incredibly relieved, and his relief exploded in laughter.

"I told Tom our radio devices would be obsolete" . . . he choked

"Yes," Frobisher said quietly. "Obsolete, only in a way you hadn't planned for. The whole crew of the *Homeward* was obsolete—and you've been on probation all along. But you've come out of that now, I think. Wait a bit—don't go on to Norten just yet. Turn north—just a mile or two. There's something I want you to see."

Brian protested, "Paula—"

John Frobisher leaned forward. "Mellen's wife—" and this time Brian did not bridle at the vulgarity, "—will be all right, Kearns. We don't get the gravity sickness very often, now, but any danger in it was knocked out even before the spacers quit running. The girl's probably uncomfortable, and it looks terrible, but it isn't dangerous. We'll have her fixed up within an hour."

And somehow Brian's anxiety slid away. The words didn't mean much to him, but his training had taught him one thing, at least; he recognized competence when he met it, and it was in every inflection of John Frobisher's voice. Acquiescently he swung the ship to the northeast. The rising sun broke in a wave of brightness over the horizon, revealing the far-away line of ruined buildings that looked down drearily over a too-flat strip of dismal, barren land where nothing grew, a straight level plain of grey concrete. For miles it seemed to stretch away; Brian, flying low, could see the grass that pushed its

way upward through the crumbling concrete, the dreary gap-windowed buildings softened a little by ivy. And then he saw them: eight tall regular shapes, straight and still gleaming a little . . .

"There are only two laws in our culture," Frobisher said quietly. "One is that no man shall enslave another. And the second—" he paused, looking straight at Brian, "—is that no man shall enslave himself. Which is why we have never destroyed these ships. This was the old spaceport, Brian. Does it look very majestic? Would you care to land?"

Brian looked, thinking: this was what he had expected to see first. And yet, somehow, this was what seemed greatest to him: that man, having created this monster, should have the common sense to abandon its dreary domination—and the courage to leave it there. Men destroy only what they fear.

"Come on," Brian said steadily. "Quit riding me. Let's get back home—and I do mean home. There's a sick girl waiting for you, doctor. And even if it isn't dangerous, they're going to be worrying until you tell them it isn't." Abruptly he gunned the jets and turned the ship southeast toward Norten Village, into the rising sun. He was not aware that he had passed the final test. He was thinking about Paula, and about Ellic, waiting and worrying. He knew in the back of his mind that he'd come back here some day, look around a little, maybe even mourn a little; you couldn't put away the biggest part of your life. But he wouldn't come right away. He had work to do.

The pickup of the *Homeward* flew away, into the morning. Yet behind them the mighty symbols remained, cold and masterful, a promise and a threat: eight great starships, covered from nose to tail with green-growing moss and red rust.

—Marion Zimmer Bradley.

Have you played "Scrabble" lately? If it is a favourite game of yours may we suggest that you are more than careful in your choice of words—and particularly where you play it. The right combination of letters could produce a surprising result.

T W
UNHARMONIOUS
E R
 D

By BERTRAM CHANDLER

They come and they go, these parlour games played on fancy boards and with fancy counters, tiles or whatever. Mah Jong had its day, as did Monopoly. Now Scrabble is all the rage—and I, for one, will be rather relieved to see it superseded by some other ingenious method of wasting time. It's . . . dangerous. Oh, I admit that the conditions were just right—but I'm not altogether convinced that the pentagram was essential, not for the actual *calling*, that is. There's always the chance, and not overly slim, either, that some desperate, point-

hungry player might stumble again upon that literally unholy combination of vowels and high scoring consonants. (Frankly, I shouldn't mind doing it again myself just once; just once and with proper safeguards).

We were three nights out from Liverpool when I saw the game for the first time. I'd left the bridge at eight p.m., as usual, and had made my usual rounds; then, on my way back to the officers' flat, I looked into the Smoking Room. There were three of them playing Scrabble—the others, with the Old Man, were playing cards. There was Mrs. Wade, a middle-aged schoolmistress, Mrs. Haldane, the widow of an Australian businessman, and Mr. Whitley, who was supposed to be an author of sorts—although I've yet to see anything of his in print.

Mrs. Wade and Whitley were quarrelling violently.

"It *is* a verb!" Whitley was saying. "Mind you," he went on virtuously, "I wouldn't use it as such. I have too much respect for syntax. But it *is* a verb."

"It's *not*, I'm telling you. Oh, here's the Chief Officer. What do *you* think, Chief?"

"What's it all about?" I asked.

"Oh, you play the game like a crossword puzzle. Whoever starts does so in the middle, using as many tiles as possible—there's a bonus of fifty points if you use all seven. Then the others build up and down and out from the original word—but it must be words, *real* words . . ."

"It is a real word," said Whitley. "Look, Mrs. Haldane went across from TAX, adding E and I and T, and made EXIT. I added E and D, and got my D on a Double Word square, to make EXITED."

"EXIT is *not* a verb!" almost screamed Mrs. Wade.

"But it is." Whitley picked up a heavy book. "It's in the dictionary. Here we are. 'Exit.' Verb intransitive. To go out; depart."

"Yes. It's in your dictionary. Your *American* dictionary."

"Has anybody a better one?" asked Whitley, reasonably enough.

"I *think* I've seen it used in TIME," I said cautiously.

"Yes—and 'balding' too, no doubt. *Americanisms*!"

Well, they went on arguing about it until Whitley, with a very bad grace indeed, withdrew the offending ED. The game finished shortly thereafter and Whitley excused himself, saying that he was going to write at least another chapter of his novel.

"Going away to sulk, he means!" snorted Mrs. Wade. "What about you, Chief? Will you play?"

"I'd like to," I told her.

Oh, it's a fascinating game all right, especially if one happens to be, as I am, a crossword puzzle addict. Every night after dinner I'd make up the four—it was always the same; Mrs. Wade, Mrs. Haldane, Whitley and myself. At times both Mrs. Wade and Whitley would get rather peeved with me; they—one, as I have said, a schoolteacher and the other a writer—thought that they were the only ones who knew anything at all about words, and I was able, now and again, to score heavily with the name of some essentially maritime article. Mrs. Haldane was less egotistical than the others, but played a sound, cautious game, never leaving the way open for those following her to make a really high score.

Did I say that we played every night? No—it wasn't quite every night, as a matter of fact. There were the five films—our ration for the voyage—to be shown, and one evening one of the other passengers, a rather too hearty life-and-soul-of-the-party type decided to give an amateur conjuring show. It wasn't bad—although we would far sooner have played our usual Scrabble—and I don't think that anybody saw through more than half of his tricks.

It was for one of his tricks that he used the pentagram. He had borrowed some black, greasy crayon (used for making separation marks on butter cartons, apple crates and the like) from the Second Mate, and with it drew the five pointed star on the linoleum of the Smoking room deck. In the middle of this star he put a bucket, and in the bucket he burned an envelope alleged to contain a pound note borrowed from the Captain. The trouble started when it was discovered that something had gone wrong somewhere, and that the incinerated envelope *had* contained the pound note . . . The Old Man was still more annoyed the next morning when the Chief Steward reported to him that neither scrubbing brushes, soap, water nor new-fangled detergents would shift that pentagram.

The night after the conjuring show we played Scrabble as usual. One of us remarked that our table was standing right in the middle of the pentagram, and suggested that "pentagram" would be quite a good word to use, although it would have to be built up from "pen" or "pent." We were the only ones in the Smoking Room—the others were in the Lounge where the life-and-soul-of-the-party type was maltreating the piano.

It was an uncomfortable sort of night—hot, and sticky, and the ship was lurching just enough to make movement awkward and, for some reason, creaking far more than usual. We hadn't been playing for five minutes when Whitley and Mrs. Wade were at each other's throats. She used a word—"leet"—and claimed that it was old Anglo Saxon for a meeting. Whitley—having looked for it in vain in

his dictionary, said that there was no such word and refused to allow the score. There was the inevitable squabble about the American origin of the dictionary, and Mrs. Wade, as she always did on these occasions, wished audibly for a *real* dictionary—the *Oxford Dictionary*, for example—and told me that my employers had been very remiss in not providing one.

Anyhow, we played on, and eventually the game reached the stage when there were very few tiles left in the box, and very few squares on the board on which to place tiles—to place tiles *and* to make sense, that is. It was my turn, and I was able, rather to my surprise, to get rid of four tiles—*S*, *I*, *O* and *N* went on to *TEN* to make *TENSION*. I picked up the last four letters, saw to my horror that I had *Q* (and I hadn't got a *U* either), *X*, *Z* and two *W*'s.

The others played. Whitley put an *A* on to a vacant *I* and scored a humble two; that three-toed sloth is to the Scrabble addict what the gnu is to the crossword puzzle compiler. Mrs. Wade got a couple of *EN*s with one *E* and exclaimed, "Thank God for the printer's measure!" Mrs. Haldane found another vacant *I* and added a *D* to it.

It was my turn again.

I looked at the board; I looked at the seven quite impossible letters in their rack. I looked at the board again. What actually happened, I can't tell you. I can't remember picking up the tiles, I can't remember putting them down. But I must have done so. Suddenly, quite suddenly, I was staring at what seemed, even then, to be a most unholy combination of letters.

"There's no such word!" exploded Mrs. Wade.

"There is so!" said Whitley automatically. "I'll check in my dictionary."

"Your *American* dictionary! Why, you can't even pronounce it!"

"I can," said Whitley.

He did.

There are some sounds not meant to be heard, ever. That *WORD* was one of them. Whitley slumped back in his chair, deathly white. Mrs. Wade's florid complexion faded to a dirty grey. Mrs. Haldane, naturally sallow, showed her horror by staring eyes and open mouth. Myself? Well, if I looked as bad as I felt I must have looked overdue for the graveyard.

And suddenly it was quiet. The normal creakings of the ship's uneasy movement were stilled. The crash and tinkle of the piano in the nearby lounge were no more than a ghastly tintinnabulation, incredibly distant, thin and dreary.

Overhead, the lights dimmed and faded, dimmed and faded, glowed faintly with a colour that was neither red nor blue yet, somehow, had the worst qualities of each.

And it was cold.

Over the table, over the board, there was . . . *something*. A mist it was at first—a pallid, greenish mist, swirling sluggishly, congealing slowly. The thing that, at last, stood on the board was not human—neither was it anything else. Its body could almost have been that of one of the smaller dinosaurs . . . Almost. Its head was more apelike than reptilian. It stank of burning sulphur.

"Well?" it asked irritably. "I haven't got all night, you know."

As it spoke, one horny toe was disarranging the tiles on the Scrabble board, shuffling them.

"Well?" it asked again.

Whitley started to laugh. It wasn't hysterical laughter—the man seemed genuinely amused at something.

Tough guy, I thought. *All right—I'll be tough too.*

"What's the joke?" I asked (I hope) calmly.

"It is funny, Chief," he said. "Really funny. The pentagram—and I must warn you not to let any part of your bodies get inside it, its function is to stop the demon from getting at us—the sacrifice, and then the WORD . . . I did some research on demonology once, for a novel."

"The sacrifice?" asked Mrs. Wade. "I can't remember any virgins getting their throats cut in here tonight."

"Last night," said Whitley. "In spite of the time lag it worked."

"*Last night*? Even then there wasn't a sacrifice."

"There was so. The Old Man's pound note."

"You called me away from a Poker session," said the demon sulkily.

"No less than fifty-two souls in the kitty."

"That's just too bad," said Whitley. The colour was back in his face now. "I suppose that the usual rules are still in operation."

"We play Deuces wild, of course . . ."

"No, no. Wishes, and all that."

"Yes. I obtain my release by granting a wish."

"One wish each," said Mrs. Wade.

"No. One wish. Period. Haven't you heard of the Award?"

"I wonder if I dare . . ." Mrs. Haldane was murmuring. "But . . . *The Monkey's Paw* . . ."

I looked at Whitley, knew that he was thinking as I was, was remembering Jacob's tale of the three wishes, and the mutilated man called from the grave and knocking at the door, and the last wish being used to send him back . . .

"We shall have to be careful," said Whitley, then. "A foolproof wish . . . H'm . . . My novel . . . Hollywood . . ."

"I've got a ticket in the Irish Sweep," I said.

"But you didn't *say* the WORD. I did."

"But I put it down."

"And *you*," said Mrs. Wade to Whitley, "only said the WORD because *I* told you to."

"We're all in this," said Mrs. Haldane. "I think that we should be able to handle it like civilised people."

The demon laughed. "When you mortals start using *that* phrase, the Old Man puts on an extra shift of stokers!"

The widow ignored this.

"You'll admit, all of you, that what has happened has happened as a direct consequence of the interaction of the personalities involved. As I said—we're all in this together. The Wish, when it is made, should be something for the common good."

I could, I thought, give each of the others a quarter share in my Sweep ticket . . .

"The common good," repeated Mrs. Wade. "That's easy." We waited to hear her proposal. "Bring us," she ordered, addressing the demon as though he were a half-witted juvenile delinquent, "a good, *English* dictionary."

I have never been able to condemn Whitley for throwing that thick, heavy book over the side, and the Scrabble board and tiles after it.

—Bertram Chandler.



WHEN

John Brunner is himself something of a jazz enthusiast and recent stories of his dwelling on this theme point out to us that many of our readers are just as enthusiastic. The following little cameo is undoubtedly his best so far—we hope that you like it also.

GABRIEL . . .

By JOHN BRUNNER

It all began when we were walking down one of the streets around Marble Arch—Louie Ditton, my clarinetist, and me, on our way to play a date at Nick's Cellar. We were having a sort of non-conversation if you follow me; now and then he'd heave a sigh, and I'd go sort of uh-uh. Then it'd be my turn to sigh first.

We both had the same thing on our minds—we were thinking of a guy who played so much music that we'd pretty well decided to hock our horns and go in for paper-hanging or something where there isn't that kind of competition.*

It was a wet, cold and altogether miserable night. The rain was dripping off my trumpet-case, and Louie's beard was all stringy and rat-tailed. Normally that would have driven him up the wall, but in our state neither of us cared.

We were rounding a corner when the guy appeared.

Louie went into a sort of ice-skating act without the ice—he likes to wear creepers on a band date, and on the wet surface his feet slipped

* See THE MAN WHO PLAYED THE BLUES — Science Fantasy 17

and skidded like they belonged to two separate jivers. Me, I was on the outside of the pavement, but I almost fell over too, what with the shock of finding this guy there in front of us.

He must have been doing a dead run, as a start, to come charging into us like that, but I hadn't heard any footsteps. There was only traffic noise in the distance and not much of that because of the weather. Anyway, he ran into us, and when we sorted ourselves out I got a good look at him.

He wore a black evening overcoat and a black soft hat and evening dress trousers and patent leather shoes—pretty routine. But I took that in in passing. His face was what bothered me. It was sharp-featured and . . .

Well, it was sort of *sly*, if you get me. Not that he was shift-y, or anything like that. Just that I felt he was the kind of guy I'd trust exactly as far as I could throw a piano. He had black eyes—very bright and excited. And he carried a brown paper parcel under his arm.

All that happened as fast as one bar of *Tiger Rag* at a real frantic tempo. I grabbed Louie's arm before he really went sprawling and said indignantly to the guy why didn't he watch where the hell he was going?

That made him laugh, for some reason, and I didn't like his laugh any better than I liked his face. He said he was in a hurry.

I could see *that*, I told him, but he ought to be more careful. Okay, forget it anyway, no harm done.

And I started to walk on past. Louie gave the guy a hurt look and started to do the same. But he called out to us to wait a moment, and I turned back.

You're a trumpet player, the guy told me. I said yes, I was, and why?

Then take this, he said. And he whipped the parcel out from under his arm and shoved it at me. I grabbed it without thinking, and the guy spun around and went on running. He turned the corner so fast he almost blew his hat off with his hurry.

I yelled at him to wait and started after him to ask what the hell he thought he was doing. But when I got far enough to see round the corner, there wasn't a sign of him. He could have walked into the air.

Dig that character! Louie said. That's the sort of guy you say crazy, man, to—and really mean it. Had I noticed when his hat nearly fell off? I said I had.

Weird way he wore his hair! said Louie. Kind of twisted up at the sides. Almost like a pair of horns.

I shrugged that one off, looking down at the parcel he had stuffed into my hand. I was just beginning to make out that the feel of the solid thing under the paper was sort of familiar.

Louie looked at it and said what could it be? I think I know, I said. I put my case down on the ground and tore off the sodden paper.

Man! I said to Louie in a reverent tone of voice. Will you dig—that—horn!

Right there in my hand lay the most beautiful trumpet I had ever seen.

It shone under the street lamps as if it was glowing. When a drop of rain fell on the metal it lit up like a yellow jewel. I tried the valve action, and the springs responded with a life of their own. The tops of the valves were set with mother-of-pearl which changed colour like a melted rainbow, and it had a wide mouthpiece which felt almost cushiony when I put my finger to it.

We stood there and admired it for a couple of minutes before we could say a word. Finally I dug for my voice somewhere in my throat, which had gone dry with awe. I said I didn't know where the guy ever got hold of a horn like that one, but it was a cinch only one thing could have made him get rid of it.

The fact that he was nuts, Louie suggested.

I told him no. The horn must be hot. Stolen.

Louie agreed after a while that I was most likely right. He sounded as glum as a square at a jazz record session.

Regretfully, I packed the paper round the beautiful trumpet again and picked up my own battered instrument. I told Louie to come along because we would be late at Nick's.

Nick's Cellar is one of the weirdest locations for a jazz club. I've played at sessions in all kinds of places, from a gymnasium to an art gallery, and even in an embassy once, but Nick's has the lot beaten hollow.

It's a crypt.

Seems there used to be a church over it, but that stopped one or maybe more in the blitz, and for some reason they decided not to rebuild it. Now it's under a bunch of offices, which are naturally empty Saturday nights, and Nick Barelli—one of the brighter of the band agents—rents it for a clubroom.

It's ideal, of course. Plenty of room for a cat to swing is the way I usually put it. There's a big dance floor, and a soft drinks bar in one corner, and for the unenergetic types about two hundred chairs. The bandstand's a sizeable one, as well, which means you don't keep

falling over the fans who can't hear more than two feet from your horn. I like it. That is, I *did*.

Well, we got there, and we turned out to be three minutes late, not that that really worried anyone. The rest of the band was already there. Bill Sandler on piano was warming up with a little boogie and keeping the customers happy, and Fats Hamilton, our West Indian drummer, was lighting his cigar—he never smokes the things except on the stand, when he says if he lights a cigarette he has to put it down and then when the number's over it's a stub.

I went around back with Louie and said hullo to Nick, and Louie did a bit more than *say* hullo to his girl friend Cindy, who was waiting for him. I took the beautiful horn out of the wet paper and stashed it in my case in place of my own and did a few runs to warm up and feel my lip.

It was a terrible temptation to use the other one, natch—but you can't go out on the stand with a horn you've never touched in your life. I was used to my old one, and I reckoned I'd better stick with it.

Then I went out front and called the boys to order and got the session under way.

The place was so packed by the time we broke for the interval, you'd have sworn they were about due to run out of breathing air. Not on your life. More of them turned up. It was a fine session; they were responsive. There's something about a good audience which does things to a jazzman—there's a two-way trade in appreciation which improves the music. I mean a *good* audience, of course—not one which screams for drum solos and piccolo music from the trumpeter.

Anyway. When we went off for the break, I remembered about the horn the guy had given me, and fetched it out for the rest of the boys to look at. They were as puzzled as I was, and I had to tear Louie away from Cindy for two minutes and witness that my story was Bible-true before anyone would believe the guy was fool enough to give an instrument like that to a perfect stranger.

I showed it to Nick Barelli, too, and asked him if there was any news along Archer Street of a horn like this having been pinched. He looked it over lovingly and said no, if anyone had lost it he hadn't heard, but he didn't think anyone could lose it without immediately raising Cain. I sort of signified agreement; there was something that stank about the whole business. Especially when I hunted for the maker's name and serial number. There wasn't one—and even on a custom-built model there should have been.

Well, it wasn't really my worry. I was feeling pretty good when half ten rolled around—that's closing time at Nick's. The band had played well, I'd made no clinkers—sour notes—and the customers were happy. They yelled for *The Saints*, naturally, to wind up with—it's the traditional climax to the session, and I'd hate to figure out how many hundred times I've played it, but I reckoned we might as well give it to them.

So Fats turned to his snares and went prrump ! prrump ! pérer-rer-rump !—and we were off. One of my sins is to let Alf Reardon, our trombonist, take the vocal on the last number—he's the only guy who thinks he can sing. But it has one advantage—it makes the audience leave faster.

Of course, there was the usual backwash of fans who hung around the stand, but that was normal—friends of the band, amateur musicians I'd met a few times, that sort of thing. I signed a couple of autographs for some schoolkids and got rid of them, while Louie took a solo, and told the boys nice work.

Alf knows more verses of that number than anyone else I've ever met; he'd just got to the one which runs :

When Gabriel blows

His golden horn—

Well when Gabriel blows his horn . . .

That gave me an idea. I reckoned I might as well make some use of that wonderful trumpet while I had it—I was going to turn it over to the police in the morning, of course. So I went to my case and got it. Every time I looked at it it seemed better.

When I put it to my mouth to blow through it and warm it up, it felt almost like the darned horn was kissing me—as if it actually *wanted* to be played. And when I worked the valves, they seemed to move all the way home at the lightest touch.

Nick was out in the body of the hall, turning out the lights. I told Alf he could quit scaring the audience away, and while Bill rounded out the chorus on piano, I tried over a few notes on the horn to see was it in tune, bending over with my hand round the bell to keep it quiet.

I didn't need to touch the tuning slides at all.

Alf said how about jamming a bit, and the rest of the boys agreed, saying they weren't tired—quite often when the audience leaves a club, the band stays behind and fools around, because jazz is fun to play as well as listen to. So I said if we were going to stick around, we might as well finish this one properly, and I put up the horn and started to blow out.

Fat's big mouth fell open and his cigar went rolling on the floor. He didn't notice. Me, I was amazed enough myself! As for the people listening, they were drooling. "Tommy! What's come over you?" I heard Cindy yell, and the boys' faces were all lit up with excitement.

I couldn't have answered that. What was happening reminded me of a description I'd read of what it feels like to play after taking marijuana—as if all the notes were there already in the horn, stacked up in the right order, and you just had to breathe to get them out. I wasn't playing that horn—it was playing me.

Only this wasn't from muggles. That only makes you think you're good. I *knew* this was good—I could hear the delighted yells from behind me, and even Nick, a hard-boiled case if ever there was one, had come and perched on the side of the stand to listen. Every note I thought of came out of the horn just shaped right: smooth as silk, with a big fat tone and perfectly timed.

I'd never had any illusions about the band—the boys were all pretty good players, of course, or I wouldn't have kept them on—but I knew we weren't class. Now, though—tonight—we were really swinging, and I was sure it was this horn I held. I was ready to make up my mind to keep it without question, or if it was traced to me to mortgage my house and give the owner anything he wanted—my wife, come to that. Just so I could have this trumpet. I felt I could go on playing for ever; I doubted if my lip would ever get tired.

After a dozen choruses, though, I felt I was kind of monopolising the conversation, and made to break off and let someone else solo.

For heaven's sake don't stop! Fats told me prayerfully. I know you can't possibly play like that, but I don't want to wake up!

All the boys seemed to think the same way. So I kept at it. This was something I'd dreamed about for years—the kind of music I could always think and never manage to play. And behind me the band was rising to unheard-of heights: Fats was laying down a light, springy, solid beat and Bill's piano and Ed on bass were marching right along with a sort of infectious gaiety; Louie's clarinet was filling in at just the right moments, and even Alf had suddenly acquired a righteous tailgate style, properly syncopated and sliding around like a snake on ice. The parts fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle, and it was good.

I was standing with my back to the dance floor, of course, with Alf and Louie facing each other between me and the rhythm section, not paying any mind to the rest of the room. This was strictly between

ourselves. I felt dreamy, far away—almost like being drunk. I noticed Fats's cigar lying on the floor. It had gone out.

After a while, though, even through my preoccupation with what I was—well, call it playing, though it wasn't like any other time I'd blown through here—I began to notice the smell.

It wasn't altogether a pleasant smell. It was earthy, but there was a sickly, sweetish edge on it, like bad meat, and I saw that Fats had noticed it too—he's sensitive about that sort of thing. He'd cocked his light-brown head on one side as if trying to sort it out from the air.

I cut the volume down and played a few bars pianissimo, and over the music I heard Nick say suddenly, sounding surprised: where did all those guys come from? I locked the door.

All what guys? I turned to look over my shoulder, and saw what he meant. There was a half-seen surge of movement all across the dance floor. The room was in darkness except for the bandstand, but I could make out—must have been a hundred indistinct human shapes.

I had to do a double-take before I really caught on, but someone else was faster—Cindy. She screamed and got to her feet. Fats shouted something hysterical, and made for the door, knocking his stool flying; the rest of the boys took one look and fought with the fans to follow him out of the room.

I stopped blowing in the middle of the note and spun round to find myself looking straight at the nearest of the strangers. I felt everything come to a sudden stop, including my heart.

The guy had no face.

I tried to shut my eyes, but I couldn't. I stood there absolutely petrified for maybe a minute, while I tried to persuade myself it wasn't really happening. The whole crowd of them were in rags. They moved with a tired, dragging step, and at every movement, through the holes in their clothes, there showed the whiteness of bare bones.

I gave a sort of nervous chuckle and tried to speak. My first attempt ended in a squeak.

They walked, they talked, them—dry bones!

I don't know how long I'd have stood there with them slowly, purposefully coming towards me, before my nerve finally broke, if the guy hadn't come through the wall.

First, there was a glow, as if the wall was shining; then it got bigger, and I could see the guy behind the light. He stepped out into the room, and it looked like he was clothed in luminous air—as though a bubble of brightness was all round him. The zombies stopped walking towards me.

Then he looked round, and started towards the bandstand. As he moved, the light got brighter. When it touched one of the ghastly crowd, first the rags and then the bones sort of melted away like mist. The smell dwindled until when the light round the stranger reached the stand there was nothing left.

I stood there foolishly with the horn in my hand. The stranger looked at me and smiled. I cleared my throat.

How—how did you let it get away? I asked him.

It was taken by a Person you may have heard of, he told me, still smiling. It amuses him to interfere occasionally.

He put out his hand, and I remembered I still held the trumpet. Regretfully, but not really much wanting to keep it now I knew what it was, I gave it to him.

Don't worry, he said. You'll hear it again—at the proper time.

And he went away.

My knees folded up under me, and I sat down on the edge of the bandstand. There was sweat dripping off my face when I really began to take in what I'd done. And I'd played it in a crypt, of all places—where people had been buried all around me!

I slowly realised that Louie was calling me through the door. He stuck his head in, made sure the room was empty, and then came running across the stand. He asked was I all right, and I told him sure I was.

What happened to the horn, he wanted to know.

I said I'd given it back to its owner, the greatest trumpeter of them all.

Who's that? said Louie, puzzled. Have I ever heard the guy?

No, I told him. He's never blown the horn. But when he does—man, then you'll hear music.

I got up and collected my own trumpet, and went out across the floor humming the tune of *The Saints*. After a while I started to sing the words to it.

*When Gabriel blows
His golden horn—*

—John Brunner

S T
T R
A I
I C
R K

Every once in a while we have the opportunity of presenting to British readers a rare gem of a story from America. All too seldom such stories are by women writers for we feel that they often have a far deeper insight into understanding the human race as a whole than the males.

By MILDRED CLINGERMAN

Day after day the bartender did his fool's routine of a man going down stairs. The regular customers loved it. Of course there weren't any stairs, but sooner or later somebody would call down the long length of bar, "Dick, old boy, I'd like a bottle of that Chateau Margaux '29 to take home to the wife. How about it?"

After twenty years of it, Dick could recognize his cue. "Certainly, sir," he'd say gravely. "It won't take me a minute. You'll excuse me while I step down to the cellar?"

The regulars would grin and nudge the newcomers, the uninitiated. "Watch it," they'd say. "Just watch this." And the newcomers would set their faces in accommodating lines tinged with the resentment of those who aren't in on the joke, and watch Dick carefully. Dick, his bald head gleaming in the overhead light, would start his stately descent into the cellar, until, step by step, the bald head had disappeared from view.

"What's so hot about that?" Nine times out of ten some disgruntled stranger would challenge the regulars. "Hell, I can still walk down a few stairs."

"Just wait, Just wait and *listen*." Gleefully the regulars would shush the unimpressed stranger until reluctantly he subsided and listened.

Nobody knew, or cared to inquire too closely, just what it was Dick had rigged under the bar for his sound effects, but they were good. One heard the rattle of a chain lock, the squeak of the heavy door at the foot of the steps, a clicking light switch, and then the stone-muffled tramp, tramp of Dick's feet to the wine racks. Some hesitation then followed while the customers imagined Dick selecting the wine asked for, then they heard him crossing the stone floor. They heard again the click of the light switch and the door closing behind him with a hollow booming sound, the rattle of the lock, and Dick (a heavy man) was climbing the stairs, puffing a little. As he gradually came into view, one often saw a wisp of cobweb trailing across the bald head, and in his arms he cradled a dusty bottle. The bottle was always the same, but the puzzled stranger didn't know that.

"Now!" the regulars would shout. "Look! Look!" Everybody would raise himself from his bar stool to peer over the bar, pointing at Dick's feet and the floor he stood on, the stranger along with the rest. It was always a pleasure to watch the stranger's face as he took in the solid cement floor that showed through the slatted walkway running unbroken behind the bar. The grin breaking on the newcomer's face always started out a little sickly, but as light dawned and the illusion faded, the usual verdict was, "I'll be damned." And everybody was happy.

"Let's see what you got in the bottle" . . . but the regulars were quick to explain, low-voiced, that Dick was funny about the bottle. It was just an old empty bottle, but Dick didn't go handing it around. If you wanted to get snubbed, try making a grab for it.

Dick, as always after he'd finished the stair trick, just stood there for a while, holding the empty bottle, and anybody looking at him would have been surprised at the expression on his face. Nobody

really looks at a bartender. The man behind the bar is either a smile or a mild grouch, and in any case, a pair of willing hands—reaching, setting down, polishing, ringing the cash register. Even the bar philosophers (the dreariest customers of all) prefer to study their own faces in the backbar mirror. And however they accept their reflected images, whether shudderingly or with secret love, it is to this aloof image that they impart their whisky-wisdom, not to the bartender. Dick knew that. For twenty years he had watched his customers with growing bewilderment. His small, kind eyes assessed his world, and found it very lonely.

Occasionally Dick, too, took note of his own face in the backbar mirror, but most of all he used the mirror for watching The Game. The Game went on and on, year in and year out, but Dick never tired of watching it. Just as the customers smiled and narrowed their eyes at his stair trick, wanting to believe, so too did he take in all the nuances of The Game, and even after twenty years of it he kept on wanting to believe. Nightly he assured himself that people do fall in love in bars . . . well, anyway that one couple . . . Maybe. He hoped so.

Dick was almost used to the loneliness of his room in the musty old hotel. Every night when he unlocked his door he found the steaming foot bath waiting. How many bellboys had he trained to that attention? Too many, perhaps . . . Oh, well, there was the evening paper on the arm of the shabby easy chair, and the slippers waiting for his feet to emerge from the good hot water. A wife now . . . might remember he liked hot tea waiting, too, but then again she might not relish such tasks around 1:00 a.m. And, anyway, what was the use of wondering about that? It certainly wasn't very likely at this point that Dick would ever marry. Marriage happened to other men. Well, didn't it? He would gladly have married if the chance had ever . . . happened. How else did you get married? Nobody sets forth with the thought: I'm going to find somebody, *today*, for instance, and get myself married. No, it wasn't that way at all.

First, somebody catches your eye. You look at each other, past the mask, beyond all the things life does to cover people up, hide them, and your eyes meet in a far place that's familiar to each of you. And that's a frightening thing. That's the beginning of The Game, and the fear is part of the fascination. The Game is really just hide and seek, until neither can bear to hide any longer. But you can't play The Game until you meet the right pair of eyes. Now, can you?

Dick had looked into a lot of eyes, but none had been right. He had watched hundreds of people experience that shock of recognition, though. That's how he knew so much about it. Well admit it . . . He'd also seen it assumed, counterfeited. He'd watched the Hunters

of both sexes mark their prey. Usually they avoided their own kind, but sometimes, like jungle beasts meeting on a narrow path, they challenged each other. Then it was a battle to the death. Whenever this happened in Dick's bar, he could almost feel the charged atmosphere. You could see that it affected the customers, too. The laughter grew louder, the drinks went down quicker, and quarrels sprang up in the room like little fires. A good time for the stair trick . . . it helped to clear the air.

This night Dick had gone through the routine and was still puffing from his exertions, just standing there, holding the empty bottle with that strange look on his face, when somebody down at the end of the bar called to him in a high, clear voice :

"Tell me, bartender, what's it like in the cellar?"

Dick turned slowly towards the voice and his hands shook so much he was afraid he'd drop the bottle. Nobody else had ever asked that question. Laughter and head-shaking admiration were supposed to be the end of it. This woman, now . . . She only came around once or twice a month. How did she know the cellar was . . . very real to Dick? He hurried to set the empty bottle before her so that she could examine it—the emptiness of it, the carefully preserved dust and cobwebs.

"The cellar . . ." Dick said. "It's nice."

She lifted her look to his. "I know," she said.

Their eyes met in the far place, and yet Dick trembled with unbelief. She was a Hunter, and Hunters were clever enough to find your far place, or to pretend they had.

"You're a liar," Dick whispered. "You don't really know."

The woman tucked a dark lock of hair behind her ear and smiled at him. "Don't believe me," she said. "Forget it. I'm just tight. But . . . tell me, in your cellar . . . have you found the door to the other side?"

"I don't know what you mean." Dick moistened his dry lips and glanced up and down the bar and out to the crowded tables. The customers were engrossed in their own talk, their glasses almost full.

The woman sighed and shook her head at him gently. "You're afraid," she said. "You know what I am, and now—this minute—I'm drunk enough to admit it. Also drunk enough and crazy enough to try to find the way out . . . You know you can't go through the door alone? Even if you find it?"

Dick looked long at her before he nodded his head. Yes, he knew. And here, at last, was the woman, if only he could believe in her.

"Aren't you lonely, too?" the woman asked softly. "Don't you want me? I'd be different beyond the door . . . What do you think I've been hunting for, all these years?"

"Why didn't you speak sooner?" Dick whispered. "Years ago"

"You wouldn't look at me," she said. "You'd never really look at me."

That was true. He was afraid of the Hunters, and most afraid of the few quiet, lovely women who did not look the part. Like this one.

"I can't believe it," he said. "You don't want me." He shook his head dazedly.

The woman tried to smile. "All right," she said. "I was crazy to think you'd listen, that you'd believe . . . I don't blame you. And now the hell with it, I don't believe in anything at all." She slid down from the high bar, stood and turned to walk away.

"Wait."

For a moment she hesitated, then turned again to face him. He looked at her soft red mouth and the cloud of dark hair, and at the slender, sweet body before he allowed himself to look again into her eyes. She faced him as if he were Judgment, and she standing up pleading for mankind. Her eyes admitted everything. The meanness, the drab cheating, all the niggling subterfuges, the hurt, the fear, and yes . . . the love, to balance them all—to write them all off.

"Come with me now," he said.

Quickly then she ducked under the hinged serving board and was beside him on the slatted walkway behind the bar. He took her hand and smiled at her and together they went down the stairs.

There was the old bottle standing on the bar—that was the first thing noticed. Then somebody heard the creaking of the door. Somebody else heard it chained and locked again from the other side, and as sounds died in the room, almost everybody in the bar heard the muffled steps of the two of them crossing the stone floor. But they didn't stop at the wine racks. The regulars will tell you that. They went beyond—far beyond—any point Dick had ever reached alone. Until at last the footsteps ceased—brought up short it seemed before the last barrier. And then there was time enough and silence enough for every man in the bar to remember blank closed doors and the sour taste of failure.

The sighing had already begun—the thin, stingy *ahhh* for this latest defeat—when they heard the sound that was new and triumphant. Not one of the customers will swear it was music he heard, but every last one of them swears he heard Dick open the door to the Other Side . . . and close it again behind him.

—Mildred Clingerman.

TOO

In No. 16 we published a short story by Duncan Lamont dealing with an editor receiving the perfect story and its reaction by everyone who read it. In the following story by E. R. James the premise is considerably changed—it is taken from the author's viewpoint.

PERFECT

By E. R. JAMES

"This ought to interest you," said my wife.

We were in the public library and she had come from one of those dusty corners in the non-fiction section which are only penetrated by the bravest of readers.

I took the book. It was one of those thin books which are made to appear large by the use of big margins, so that in spite of being about nine inches by six, I could see it only held about forty thousand words. It was not the sort of book my wife likes herself, since, although she reads besides being ornamental, her accomplishments fail before words of more than fifteen syllables.

It looked like laborious reading to me, but she had never found me a book before. "O.K.," I said. Husbands do such things. I ought to have killed her. Then the worst that could have happened was a rope around my neck.

I began to read it openly to please her. I ended by devouring it. I could tell at once that the author had never even heard of science-fiction. My mind took up where he had left off. The result was sensational.

Here was a story screaming to be written. I began to dream of incidents in it. My brain was on fire. The typewriter drew me like a magnet.

There was none of the usual difficulty. Stock situations and stock characters were out. This story could only have perfect situations that no one had ever thought of before. The characters were nudging my elbow. No one had ever thought of them before, either, because they could only have arisen as a result of reading that book. I was certain that no matter what sort of reader picked up the story I was going to write, there would be a character with which he could identify himself throughout the narrative.

Short stories are my usual forte. This would be around six to eight thousand. In a thing like that, I would just have to write the climax and suggest everything that had gone before. At 5,000 words, I gave up. This was a thing that would not be confined.

It would have to be a novelette. 12 - 14,000. I began again. 4,000 words of the new start—and I was stuck again. This was not a story like that.

Somewhere around this time my wife sent me a post card, because I was still reading my mail. I did not answer it because I had no time for going to the pictures with her. Such rubbish was out. I was about to write a story about 20,000 words long, that would rock the world with its implications.

It grew to 30,000. Emaciated and hollow-eyed and with my fingers down to the first joint and my typewriter worn out, I divided it into four parts which I hoped might be suitable for a serial and sent it off before it got hold of me again.

Three minutes after posting it, I thought of two other longish parts that ought to have been included in the plot. It was a good thing that it was by then the Queen's property until being delivered the other end, or I might not be writing this. The human frame can only stand so much.

But of course I was sure that it would not be accepted as it was. It was not finished. I lent one of the discarded write-ups to a friend, who was not keen to be inflicted with it. Three weeks later his wife sent me a postcard she'd received from Tibet. He'd written that he thought he had the answer to the riddle of all life. I don't think she quite understood.

An intermediate letter from the editor stated somewhat coolly that he had begun it twice but was really on the look out for good short stories. Then it came back from him. He said he didn't know what to say, but that it certainly wasn't suitable for his magazines because there just wasn't enough of it.

I had known that. With it back in my possession it took hold of me properly. 40,000, 50,000, 60,000—70,000. That was it.

A masterpiece. I wrote to a publisher I had carefully selected, asking whether he was in a position to arrange for simultaneous publication all over the world. He begged me to send him the MS. The day he received it, he sent me a telegram—I was not on the phone.

I sent a wire to the editor to act as my agent but not to be put off with any less royalty than that given to Mr. Churchill for his monumental works.

The upshot of it all was that the publishing firm suspended all other work. They had to. The printing firm which set up their novels lost so many of its staff, who kept going off with the proofs to read and consider.

Word must have got about. The owner of a film company came to see me. I gave him a brief outline of what it was all about and he implored me to sell him rights. He said it would delay shooting if he had to work through an agent. Three hours after leaving me, he rang me up—I had to have a telephone installed—and said he had been on the trans-Atlantic telephone to a big American Company, who now wanted to merge with his. It was too big for either of them alone.

Complimentary copies prior to publication date arrived, and I sent them off to a few chosen friends. After all, they were not likely to be in time to get one of the first printing of half a million.

I don't like to blame them, so I must assume that other people got hold of copies. Perhaps a reviewer left one unguarded, or something like that. But it was at this stage that I was nearly blown up by a bomb in my new car. It had been kind of the largest garage in town to give it to me, but they were probably only thinking that it was an advertisement to themselves, and I think the car company suggested it . . . I declined a replacement, and the police granted me protection. M.I.5., or whatever department was concerned, also sent a man. There are people in this world who do not want other people to understand the meaning of existence.

I waited until publication day and then ventured out in the armoured car kindly lent to me by the army. But—I just could not understand it. There was not a single copy in the windows of the largest book-

seller in town—and he had assured me that his whole sales space would be given up to my epic work.

The shop, in fact, was shut. So were all the others in town. I could see soldiers reading something inside but they would not open up even when I shouted out who I was.

About mid-day, the Prime Minister, the ex-Prime Minister, the Presidents of the United States, France, Germany, Italy and I suppose a score of other notables, besides two sombre Russian gentlemen from the Kremlin, came secretly to see me.

I suppose it's all for the best, in a way. In view of some of the things that have happened, I can see that it would be awkward, to say the least, if everyone just stopped whatever they were doing and did nothing but read and re-read my book. There would be no one to bring around the milk each morning. There would be no one to milk the cows so that the milk would be brought to the dairies for the milk man to pick up. People have to have milk and all the other thousand and one things of modern civilisation, or they would die. I would not like to be the last man left on Earth.

Which all goes to show that there is something to be said for the imperfect stories which do see print. If you ever consider taking up writing, be warned by my experience, don't destroy your public by writing something which people simply cannot put down.

—E. R. James.

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 ** ***“Gone Away—No known address”*** **
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T
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S

Unfortunately (editorially) this short-short story is one of those where any comment beforehand would be detrimental to the plot. Let us say, therefore, that it is the first excursion into the realm of fantasy of yet another London newspaperman.

By **MIKE NEVARD**

The sky was a vast, chequered plain. Blue and white, nothing but squares. Straight lines filled with colour—like a huge chessboard with no sides.

Or with a hundred sides.

And the whole thing was spinning and circling on an axis that wasn't there; the blues, flat and shifting; the white, a glaring ache.

And somewhere a bell was ringing, and it clawed the squares and dragged them . . . slow and slow . . . to stop their spinning. And I wasn't looking at the sky; I was looking at the floor—all tiled; little chips of blue and white.

I lifted my head, and they were on the wall, too.

They climbed halfway up. After that was a shiny grey and raw light spattering off the tiles.

My shoulder ached, and I twisted it, and looked down at my hand.

I was wearing a strange blue suit—the one I always wore—and my fingers were clenched tightly on a door handle.

I stood looking at my hand because I didn't know what I was doing there. And yet . . .

I still stood there; still looked at my hand; a strange hand.

I was going in that room.

I'd never been there before—but I knew what I would find inside. I could see the room—every part of it. Every drape and every corner.

I knew that the paintwork was white; there was a dressing table against the left-hand wall; the cases—standing by the ottoman; the tallboy with the chipped door; the grey carpet—and the pink rugs.

The rugs—pink like the rest of the room. Like the walls, the ceiling; like the huge drapes that hung across the double bay windows and buckled on the floor.

And outside the window—the huge willow, with the sun sprinkling its feeble rays through the leaves and making patterns on the pink covers of the big divan.

I turned the handle and the door swung inwards. The drapes were half pulled and the willow brushed gently against the sun-flecked panes.

The covers on the divan were all screwed up and the man I had come to kill turned restlessly in his sleep.

I stood there for ages and I could feel the blue and white tiles behind me. I swallowed and there was a hurdle in the back of my throat.

I used both hands to close the door, and my sweaty palms left moisture on the paintwork.

I looked at the man on the bed, and again that strange feeling of familiarity crept over me.

I knew this man. Yet I had never met him before.

But kill! How?

My hand went to my pocket, and closed round the cold hard piping. I slid it out, unclenched my fingers and balanced it on my palm as if it was contaminated. Then my fingers folded round it caressingly.

I moved towards the bed, and the room closed in on me. I didn't feel my legs moving—I just saw the room passing by and the old man lying in a pink cell and the soft walls of silk closing in.

It shattered with a yammering yell . . . a screaming racket that dispersed the pink drapes, the walls, the silken clothes, and threw in a huge clammering alarm . . . a giant clock with a big bell on top ringing out its timely warning.

The old man jerked awake, and reached shakily for the button.

Sweat ran down his face; his eyes stared; he clicked off the screaming alarm and lay back panting.

His eyes flickered around the room; in the distance a clock chimed the hour.

Then he saw me.

He didn't yell; he just stared, and a puzzled frown puckered his forehead.

I clenched the piece of lead in my pocket and stared right back at him.

"I . . ." he started, and lay with his mouth agape. I swung towards the bed and the cosh was out and I hit him and the blood spurted and I hit again and I kept on hitting . . . hitting . . . hitting . . . hitting until the head pulped.

The sheets were soaked and blood splattered up the walls. My teeth were clenched, I was drawing hard for breath, and there was a hammering in my ears. I staggered back and the cosh slipped from my fingers.

I didn't look back. I just walked to the door and turned the handle and out to the glaring tiles.

Someone called.

I turned dizzily and there was someone coming up under the naked bulbs . . . the glare hurt my eyes . . . I staggered back and ran.

The tiles clattered and seemed to fly all about me, and I was running down a tunnel of chattering tiles. Spinning and turning—like a revolving drum.

And sounds caught in the spin . . . music . . . voices . . . yells . . . swept into the tunnel and whisked around.

Stairs to the right. I jump, spring, bounce, two at a time. Up and up. The walls speeding by, crashing down below and a voice chasing, and the tunnel clattering back there somewhere.

Another sea of tiles and the waves are drowning me, and the blood is pounding in my head . . . my lungs are bursting. Stairs, and I'm up and my legs drag; weight, like molten lead, dragging—and my head light and singing.

Breath tears through my throat, and a snaky ladder ahead . . . uneven, hanging out . . . light flares behind frosted glass: the roof.

The splintered rungs scrape my face and the ladder rocks, and the skylight's stuck. I heave and wood trembles. Shoulders back, duck; head forward—crash. Splinters of glass shower round me, and fresh air courses through my swollen throat . . . blood in my eyes.

My legs tear across blades of glass, and I lay panting on the black shiny roof. It slopes like a tilted playground—up to the sky. And the sun glares down. I stagger up and my feet slip and slide on the slates. Sliding . . . down . . . down . . . my feet grip, and there's a red misty pain . . . but I can see another roof . . .

At the bottom—jump; you'll make it; feet spring and the wind rushing . . . shiny slates . . . clash . . . sliding . . . back and back . . . weight . . . forward . . . I swing and warm blood, the gutter

trips . . . hands clawing . . . knees crack . . . tearing face . . . and I'm falling . . . and a big blue sky spinning and throbbing . . . blue and white . . . straight lines filled with colour . . . and somewhere a bell is ringing . . . ringing . . . ringing . . . ringing.

The bell !

I jerk awake and reach shakily for the alarm. I can feel the sweat running down my face, and I find the clock and the yammering echoes into a chamber of silence.

The breath's coming hard in my throat and I lie there panting, and looking at the pink expanse . . . the drapes which plunge to the floor, the tinted ceiling, the pastel walls. In the distance a clock chimes the hour.

Then I see him—a strange man standing by the bed. And yet, somehow, he isn't so strange. It's as if we've met before . . . as if . . .

"I . . ." The words won't come, and I just watch him, and he comes towards me and his hand comes out of his pocket in a wide swinging sweep . . .

—Mike Nevard.

Back Issues

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"Automation" is a term which most fantasy readers have been conversant with for years. Only recently have the general public (at the instigation of the popular press) fastened upon the word as if it applied to some monster from the deeps of space. Bearing in mind the current unrest in industry because of automation Mr. Guthrie presents the following story—but does not infer that it is a solution to the problem.

BREATHING SPACE

By ALAN GUTHRIE

George was late in arriving for work which meant that he had to park far from his usual place and reached the gate well after the majority of workers had gone. The parking attendant touched his cap as George approached. He was polite but that meant nothing, almost everyone in General Radios was polite to George.

"Mr. Kersland, sir."

"Yes?"

"There's a man been hanging around. Joe Macguire. I think he wants to see you."

"Does he?" George stared towards the entrance to the office building. A man, wearing mechanics coveralls, straightened from where he stood leaning against the wall. "I see him."

"He's a nasty type, Mr. Kersland," said the parking attendant. "You want me to escort you?"

"It won't be necessary." George walked off before the other could protest. Macguire stepped forward as he reached the entrance.

"Mr. Kersland, could I have a word with you?"

"My office is inside, Macguire."

"They won't let me in." Macguire sounded anxious. "It's my job, Mr. Kersland. I want it back."

"You're wasting your time." George stared at the man. "You were fired and that's all there is to it."

"I'm a good worker," said Macguire. "You could hire me again. You're the personnel officer and you could take me back."

"Forget it." George didn't want to waste time. He stepped forward then halted as Macguire caught his arm.

"Please, Mr. Kersland." Macguire sounded desperate. "So I made a mistake. I won't make it again, I promise you. Just give me another chance."

"You were fired for being drunk at the assembly bench," said George coldly. "Even the union didn't argue about it. You have a record as an agitator and troublemaker. I'm sorry, but that's all there is to it. You're out and you stay out."

"All right," said Macguire, his voice ugly. "That's all I wanted to know."

His left arm moved, the fist clenched, and George grunted as he blocked the blow. He was as big as the other man, still young enough to be in his prime, and could have handled Macguire without too much trouble. He didn't have to.

A uniformed doorman ran down the steps, caught Macguire by the shoulder, spun him away.

"I saw that, Mr. Kersland," he said. "Unprovoked assault. Shall I send for the police?"

"No."

"But . . ."

"Forget it." George glanced at Macguire. "We don't want trouble, not this time, but if it happens again I won't be responsible. Show him off the grounds and don't let him come back."

He stepped into the building, rode up in an elevator, strode down a corridor and pushed open the door of his office. Lucy, his secretary, looked up from her typewriter, started to say something, changed her mind and attacked the keys instead. The electric machine made a distinctive purr, not loud but expressive.

"So I'm late," said George. "So what?" He stripped off his light topcoat, hung it together with his hat in the closet, walked to his desk. "Anything important?"

"Glieker was on the phone. Mrs. Caudwell wants to know if she can collect her husband's pay direct. Wendle wants to see you."

"What about?"

"No idea." Lucy finished the letter, rolled it from the machine, inserted fresh paper and attacked the keys again. George stared at her, lit a cigarette, waited until she had finished.

"Scared, Lucy?"

"Why should I be?" She didn't look at him.

"For the same reason everyone else is scared in this business." George looked at his cigarette. "With Glieker cracking the whip of efficiency and machines replacing personnel you have a right to be scared. You'd be inhuman if you weren't. The love of security is an attribute of the human race, an attribute which is doubled in the female of the species."

"I can get by," she said. "I'm a good typist and I know my job. I can find other work if I have to."

"Sure," said George. A degree in psychology wasn't essential for a personnel officer but George had such a degree. He also knew quite a bit about medicine and social engineering. He knew that Lucy was trying to convince herself more than him. It also explained her attitude because he had been late. If he got fired it was odds on that she would be fired with him.

"I lived before the machines began to take over," she said. "I can live again. I don't have to pound a typewriter in an office."

"No," he agreed. "You can always get married."

She flushed at that, a tide of red suffusing her face almost to the roots of her blonde hair. Lucy was the kind of woman whose attractiveness increases with maturity and, at thirty, she was fully mature.

"Let's get on with the job." George looked at a pad on his desk. "This Mrs. Caudwell. I know her and I know her husband. He's under her thumb as it is and once she grabs his pay direct he will lose his last scrap of independence. The answer is no."

"Can you do that?" Lucy looked up from her machine. "He is within his rights in making the request."

"Sure, but he didn't make it, his wife did." George smiled and reached for the phone. "Personnel Office here. Put me through to Wendle." He waited. "Wendle? You wanted something?" He listened, grunted, made doodles on the pad. "All right. I'll do my best but you'll have to play ball. Yes, that's a promise." He listened again. "I have forgotten. I'm seeing Glieker this morning and will

run the cards directly afterwards." The phone squawked against his ear. "I know, I know but Glicker's the efficiency expert and we have to work with him, not against him." He listened again. "Say about an hour. Right?"

He hung up and met Lucy's inquisitive stare.

"Wendle will be here in about an hour. Better contact the office and reserve one of the computers for staff-check. Don't start the run until we join you."

"How . . ." She swallowed. "How many this time?"

"I don't know." He looked serious. "That's what I'm going to see Glicker about." He smiled. "Don't worry, Lucy, you'll be all right."

The purr of her machine answered him as he stepped from the office.

Glicker was a man who had devoted his life to the pursuit of efficiency and, inevitably, it had moulded his life. His clothes were neat, sober, made of the latest synthetics because they were more efficient than natural fibres. His desk was a model of tidiness, his secretary a colourless machine, his actions precise. He looked annoyed as George entered his office.

"Really, Kersland, couldn't you have made an appointment?"

"And waste time, electricity and money?" George lifted his eyebrows.

"I don't follow you," snapped Glicker. He didn't like George and George knew it.

"To make an appointment would have necessitated my speaking to my secretary, her to phone your secretary, your secretary to speak to you, wait for your answer, relay it back to me. Aside from the power used and the lines occupied both secretaries would have had to interrupt their work, both of us interrupt ours. It seemed to me to be more efficient just to step across the corridor." George smiled and sat down without invitation. "Smoke?"

"No." Glicker looked offended as George lit a cigarette. "Must you?"

"Yes." George inhaled, looked for an ash tray, couldn't find one and reached for the wastepaper basket instead. "I've just been talking to Wendle. He tells me that the staff are getting restless and I can't blame them. It isn't pleasant to have to wonder whether you will still have a job next week."

"Progress always creates a little temporary confusion," said Glicker. "It will straighten itself out in time."

"Maybe." George stared through the window to where the buildings and workshops of the factory sprawled over most of a square mile of fenced terrain. He blinked as Glieker spoke.

"Sorry, I didn't catch what you were saying."

"I said that I have the latest figures on staff redundancy," said the expert patiently. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Yes." George flipped ash into the wastepaper basket. "How many this time?"

"Ten percent."

"As many as that!" George shook his head. "We had seven percent last month and five the month before. Can't you ease it down a little?"

"I've eased it down as much as possible," said Glieker. "The new installations make almost the entire assembly crew redundant. In actual fact you could discharge seventy percent of them without loss of efficiency. The ten percent figure is the irreducible minimum on an overall basis as agreed by the union." He didn't seem unhappy about it. George said so.

"I deal with machines," said Glieker. "They and the few men needed to run them are my sole concern." He wrinkled his nose at the odour of tobacco smoke. "For full efficiency this factory could be run on one tenth of the present personnel, that is the final figure. Trying to find jobs for those rendered redundant by automation is really a waste of time. As the installation increases they, in turn, will inevitably have to go. To retain them would be to destroy the very efficiency we are trying to obtain."

"It's still a lot of people," said George. "Ten percent means that almost two hundred men and women will be out of work in the next few days." He looked thoughtful, thinking of Macguire. "There could be trouble."

"Trouble?" Glieker snorted his contempt. "Why should there be?"

"Men don't like being thrown out of work," said George. "Not ever and especially not now. With most of the factories converting to automation the labour market is flooded. Few of the redundant personnel will be able to find work for which they are trained. Taking other jobs means loss of income and other jobs aren't so easy to find."

"A transitory period," said Glieker. "Redundant units will eventually be absorbed into other industries."

"Which industries? Most factories are swinging to automation. Officers are using computers and technicians instead of a mass of clerks and typists. Even the shops are going in for automatic marketing. Like it or not, Glieker, we are standing on the edge of one of

the biggest depressions in history." George stared at the expert. "And you and those like you will be to blame."

"Nonsense!" Twin spots of red showed on Gliker's sallow cheeks. "There are always men who greet progress with the same old cry. Always men who are willing to blame anyone but themselves. Automation isn't new, not in principle. The first man who invented a wheel probably had to stand persecution from carriers who feared the competition of a wagon. Spinning machines were wrecked by weavers who feared they would be unwanted. The unions have followed restrictive practices for decades against mechanised labour. Now we have full automation. It is nothing to be afraid of; on the contrary, for machines can produce faster, better, more efficiently than human labour. We must use the machines, not try to banish them."

"Sure," said George. He crushed out his cigarette. "Like most experts, Gliker, you can only see one side of the coin, your side. I look at both. So we produce more—for whom? The workers we have stopped earning money to buy the goods we make? You should study economics, Gliker, you may learn something."

"I am not wholly ignorant," said the expert stiffly. "But you forget something. We live in an expanding economy. We have always lived in an expanding economy. Machines are designed to produce more because more is needed. The supply creates a demand and still more is needed. That is a simple economic rule you seem to have overlooked."

"I deal with basics," said George. "An expanding economy is fine, yes, but only as long as people have the purchasing power to keep it expanding. Cut off that purchasing power and you cut your own, economic throat. To get the golden eggs first you must feed the goose."

"Perhaps." Gliker wasn't interested. He glanced at his watch, handed George a file, and looked bored. "These are the figures you wanted. That is all, I think?"

It was.

Wendle was waiting in the office when George returned. The union man looked aggressive and ready for fight. He was an old man, his hands betraying his familiarity with manual labour. He whistled when George told him the figure.

"Ten percent!" He shook his head. "The boys aren't going to like it."

"Then they can do the other thing," said George. He wasn't against the union but he wasn't for it either. "Our agreement with the union permits us to lay-off as many workers as we please providing

we pay each redundant worker six months salary as compensation." He looked at Lucy. "Did you reserve the computer?"

"Yes. It's waiting for us now."

"Then grab the files and let's get this over with." George waited as Lucy took two long, shallow drawers from a cabinet. They were filled with punched cards, each card a complete dossier on an individual. He glanced at Wendle. "Want to check them?"

"I trust you." The union man followed George and Lucy from the office and into a large room where a row of computers had replaced most of the sales, office and record staff. A few technicians stood about and some girls, specially trained to operate the machines, translated incoming data onto punched cards, tapes, or fed it directly to the magnetized memory banks. One of them took the files from Lucy and led the way to a machine.

"How shall I set it?"

"Set for accident prone," said George. "Start with three or more." It was a gesture and he knew it. All accident prone had been weeded out long ago. While the cards were being fed to the computer, scanned, passed or rejected as the case might be, he spoke to Wendle.

"I don't expect any this run. We'll lower it down to minimum then concentrate on bad time-keeping. Agreed?"

"A man can have an accident through no fault of his own," protested the union man. "He could be late a couple of times too."

"I know that," said George. "But we've got to start somewhere. Have you any suggestions as to how to select almost a hundred personnel for redundancy?"

"That's your job," said Wendle quickly. "I can't do anything but see that you play fair." He looked into the reject tray as the machine clicked and flashed a green light. "None."

"Run it down to minimum," said George to the operator. "Then set for bad time-keeping. Late three times or more."

The operator nodded, the machine hummed, clicked, hummed again. It took less than thirty seconds to run through the two thousand cards.

"Wait a minute," said Wendle. He had just thought of something. "Are these cards up-to-date?"

"They were finalised yesterday," said Lucy. Wendle nodded, satisfied. Three cards spilled into the reject tray.

"Now two times late," said George. He didn't expect anything drastic. With the shadow hanging over them most workers arrived well before time. He handed the cards to Lucy. "Get these translated before the next run."

She nodded, took the cards, carried them to the operator of a translating machine. The girl fed them into a slot, set the identification keys, pressed a lever. Keys rattled as electronic eyes scanned the cards and fed the information to the typer. Each card was ejected together with its translation. It took thirty seconds to process the three cards.

During that time the computer expelled twelve more cards. George handed them to Lucy, hesitated, looked at the operator. "Set for piece-work bonus," he said. "Lowest up to five percent."

"I object," said Wendle. "That only applies to the factory staff and does not apply to administration, maintenance or general staff. You're penalising the bench worker."

"I'm trying to be fair," snapped George. "The percentage of bench workers is higher than any other department." He took the cards Lucy had processed and handed them to the operator. "Run it."

"I still object," said Wendle. "Why can't you select on a last-in, first-out basis?"

"We've had that argument before," said George. "Seniority doesn't automatically mean that a worker is more efficient." He yielded a point. "Let's run it as it stands. Then we'll run aggressiveness, sickness, dependants and service. We'll sort them out to find the highest number of points against each individual and then we can argue cases. Agreed?"

"I don't like it," said the union man. "I don't like it a bit."

"Neither do I," agreed George. "But what else can I do? You won't suggest anything and I've got to cut down on staff. I want to retain the most efficient workers because they deserve to be kept." He nodded towards the operator. "We'll run each batch as a whole so everyone will have a fair chance."

The computer hummed and clicked and spilled cards into the reject tray. Lucy scooped them up, had them translated, carried them back for the next run. Wendle glowered but remained silent. George yawned, thinking of the time when such an operation would have taken three clerks a full week. But that was an unfair comparison. Had it taken three clerks that long the job itself wouldn't have been necessary.

As it was it took just under two hours.

Lucy stacked the translations, collected her files and led the way back to the office. Wendle watched as she slid the trays back into their cabinet. He sat down as George produced and offered cigarettes.

He took one, accepted a light, and waited while George riffled the cards.

"There are two hundred and twenty cases here," said George. "Twenty of them can last a while longer, the rest will have to go. Let's have a quick run-through before lunch." He set down the stack and began reading from the top. "Adamson; three times late during last month, no dependants, aggressive, low piece-work bonus. Out?"

"Out." Wendle didn't like it but he had to agree. The days when unions had been strong enough to challenge the government were over. Now they had to abide by legal decisions with heavy fines for strike-action unless first preceded by arbitration and due warning of intention. They had also agreed not to resist redundancy if certain conditions were adhered to. Six months pay as compensation was one such condition. George was now fulfilling the other.

"Bernhardt," said George. "Twice late, three dependants, low bonus. Out?"

"Put him to one side," said Wendle. "His wife is sick and he's been loosing sleep lately."

George nodded and placed the card to one side. To a machine men were units which should be efficient. To Wendle they were human beings who had their off-moments. That was why the union representative was so important when it came to making a final decision.

George read off the cards, placing a few to one side at Wendle's suggestion, and throwing the rest into a heap. Lucy would take them, type out the notices, feed the information to the machine which handled the pay-roll, and they would each receive a final cheque and their names wiped off the memory banks.

"Solton," said George. "Sick . . ." He whistled as he stared at the card. "Six times in six months! How did he manage to get away with it?" He grunted as he read on. "Now I see it. He's laboratory staff, works in research, one of the white-coat boys. We can't lose him."

"Why not?" Wendle was aggressive. "What's so special about Solton?"

"Reserved personnel," said George. He frowned. "At least I think so. Check this card, Lucy and make sure that his data was in the correct file."

"What difference does that make?" said Wendle. "He's a worker, isn't he? He's just the same as any of us, right?"

"Hardly," said George. "He, like you and me, and some others like Gliker are on the reserved list. His card must have got into the general file by mistake." He swivelled and looked at Lucy. "Found it yet?"

"Yes." She was flushed with vexation. "It must have become mixed with the others when I finalised the files yesterday. It should never have gone through the machine."

"See that it's put back in its proper place," said George mildly. He threw the translation to one side. "No harm done."

"Class distinction, that's what it is," said Wendle. "The bosses win every time."

"Naturally," said George. "That's why they are the bosses." He riffled the cards. "Let's leave dogmatism out of this and get down to work. I'm getting hungry."

They finished before lunch, Wendle only protesting a few cases and George not bothering to argue. It was late when he and Lucy entered the canteen and only a few administration staff sat around the tables. Over the meal George, was very conscious of their envious stares; the women because Lucy was both attractive and had a good, supposedly safe job, the men because she was beautiful and George had a good, supposedly safe job. About the last George wasn't so sure. When the final conversion had been made would a personnel officer still be required to handle the few staff remaining? Probably yes, but George was taking no chances. Lucy and poverty were two things he didn't intend ever going together.

It was uncomfortable being watched and, after the meal, they returned to the office. George sat down, noticed a translation card, was about to discard it when the name caught his eye.

Soltón. 37 years old, technician, a good time-keeper, good worker, good everything but with apparently bad health. Six times sick in six months was getting close to a record. George pursed his lips as he read the data. Each sickness had lasted no more than three days and had occurred at regularly spaced intervals, the last being a week ago. The illness was shown as simple coryza. George reached for the phone.

"Personnel office here. Put me through to the sick bay." He picked up the card and looked at it as he waited. "Hello? Doctor Thorpe?"

"Speaking," said a deep and cheerful voice. "How's the executioner today?"

"That's not funny," said George. "Do you think I like having to fire people?"

"More than they like being fired," said Thorpe. "What can I do for you?"

"I've bumped into something odd," said George. "A laboratory worker name of Soltón. You know him?"

"Should I?" Thorpe was being cautious. George could recognise the tone.

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"No."

"All right then. I've got his history here and I'm curious as to why he keeps going sick. Six times in six months. Every four weeks on the dot he takes three days off to nurse a mild cold. Now do you place him?"

"Yes, but you're wrong on one thing. Those colds he has are far from mild."

"Yet he reports back in three days?" George checked his calendar.

"Sorry, five days, he runs it into the week-end. Well, do you place him?"

"Wait a minute." Thorpe sounded disgusted. "With almost a couple of thousand people in this place you expect me to remember a single one? I'll have to look it up." He put down the phone, the impact jarring George's ear, and over the receiver came the sound of drawers opening and paper rustling. Thorpe picked up the phone. "George?"

"Yes?"

"I've got his file. I remember him now, thin, weedy sort of a man, looks as if he was scared of his own shadow. Came in with a streamer and I doped him up and sent him home to rest."

"When?"

"When what?"

"When did you dope him up and send him home? He's been sick a half dozen times during the past few months. Did you give him the same treatment each time?"

"I think so." Paper rustled again. "Yes. Same symptoms, same treatment. Why? Is anything wrong?"

"I don't think so." George stared thoughtfully at the card in his hand. "Don't you think it rather peculiar that he should catch cold so regularly?"

"Low resistance, perhaps," suggested the doctor. "Some people seem to have a permanent cold. And hay fever, they get that pretty often too."

"That could account for the frequency," said George. "I was talking about the regularity. Could it have been faked?"

"No. The symptoms were genuine, I'll swear to that."

"Did you take a smear?"

"Of course not, why should I?" Thorpe sounded offended.

"The man had a temperature, nasal discharge, all the recognised

symptoms of a heavy cold. Even an amateur could have made a diagnosis."

"Could it have been psychosomatic?" George grinned at the snort rattling in his ear. "All right, Doctor, I know how you feel about that. But could it have been?"

"Possibly, yes." Thorpe was reluctant to admit anything connected with psychosomatic medicine. "But I say that it was just what it appeared to be, a simple cold."

"But if it were psychosomatic it would appear just like that, wouldn't it?" George smiled at the answer. "All right, Doctor, I'm not arguing. Just curious, that's all. Thanks for the information."

He hung up, frowned at the phone, reached towards it then, changing his mind, stared at the card in his hand instead. It was brief, telling nothing but the bare essentials, but within the files would be the complete life history of the technician.

He decided to study that first.

Gregor Solton sat at his bench and stared through the twin eyepieces of a microscope at the dull tip of a piece of wire. The wire had recently formed part of a radio circuit which had been under test operation for a thousand hours. He was now studying it to determine the degree of corrosion if any. If the wire showed no signs of deterioration then it would be discarded in favour of an alloy which did. General Radios could make receivers which would last a thousand years. They preferred, for obvious reasons, to make sets which needed replacement after a few thousand hours.

Solton blinked as he straightened from the microscope and made a notation on the pad beside him. He took the specimen from the instrument, dropped it into a test tube, wrote a number on the label, stood it in a rack. Malink, the section chief, passed at that moment, nodded to him then gripped Solton's arm as he reached for another specimen.

"Coffee time, Gregor. Take a break." He smiled at the other's hesitation. "That's an order. And don't look so scared at stopping work for a few minutes, no one is going to bite you."

"No, sir," said Solton. "Thank you."

"Why thank me?" Malink looked disgusted. "Go and join the rest of the boys and take a break."

He shook his head as he stared after the technician. Solton was a queer bird. Timid, almost afraid of his own shadow, a man without guts. But a good worker. A damn good worker. Malink sighed and went about his business.

Solton walked down the room to where a group of men sat around a table bearing cups, sugar, milk and a huge pot of coffee. Most were smoking. Johnson grinned at Solton and passed him a cup. Hemridge offered him a cigarette. Solton refused the cigarette, accepted the coffee, sat down as if he were sitting on eggs. No one took any notice, they were used to Gregor and his ways.

"I tell you the writing is on the wall," said Johnson, he had broken off his argument to pass Solton the coffee. "You see if I'm not right. This is the dawn of a new aristocracy."

"Bunk," said Hemridge.

"All right, so it's bunk." Johnson wasn't annoyed. "I expected that sort of answer from a short-sighted book-worm like you." Johnson and Hemridge were old friends and regularly took turns at insulting each other. "But look at the picture, You know as well as I do that every factory converting to full automation is paying off the workers, they just don't need them any more. The labour market is already flooded with mechanics, assembly hands, clerks, typists, thousands, even millions of people put out of work by the machines. Right?"

Hemridge nodded. Everyone knew that.

"So what happens? The technicians, the electronic experts and the designers are the only ones sure of full employment. The bosses, naturally, won't suffer, but all the rest will be dependent on us for their manufactured goods. So we will become the new aristocracy." He grinned at the others. "Simple."

"All right, aristocrat," said Hemridge. "Now tell me why the farmers are still at the bottom of the heap? They are more essential than we are, always have been."

"Dirt farmers have the short end of the stick," admitted Johnson. "They aren't respectable. They can't wipe out their heritage handed down by the serfs and peasants who used to till the soil. No one wants to be bossed by a farmer. But we haven't got that heritage. We are as new as the modern age. We are scientists." He struck a pose, gulped at his coffee, lit a cigarette and stared at Solton. "What do you think, Gregor?"

"I don't know." Solton clutched his cup as if it were a life-belt. "If you are right then it would be a bad thing, wouldn't it?"

"Not if we're on top of the heap," said Johnson. "I wouldn't mind having a title."

"You're all wet," said Hemridge. "But even assuming that you are right, then carry it through to the logical conclusion. People have a habit of getting rid of their aristocrats, or haven't you heard of the French Revolution?"

"I've heard of it."

"Then that's your answer. The masses don't want to be bossed by Dukes and Earls and Knights."

"So we forget the titles," said Johnson. "What's in a name? The fact remains that those who have the money have the power and, when the depression comes, we shall have the money."

"Come the depression," said Hemridge, "we shall all have mink coats and cadillacs."

Everyone laughed but it was uneasy laughter. Joking aside the depression was going to be far from amusing. Some of them were old enough to remember the grim days between the wars and no one wanted them ever to return.

"I heard something on the grapevine," said Johnson. "The latest figures for redundancy are ten-percent of total staff. That means almost a couple of hundred men and women. Next month, or week, it will be more."

"Bad," said Hemridge. "But it doesn't affect us."

"It will," said Johnson with grave-yard humour. "At the moment we are busy finalising the new designs to be handled by the machines. Once we have them and the patterns are fixed, most of us will be unwanted." He stared at his cigarette. "It's going to be tough on some of us."

"I know it." Hemridge became serious. "I've a wife and two children and a stack of stuff on deferred payments. Six months salary won't see me anywhere near being clear." He scowled at the coffee pot. "It's a hell of a life."

"Yes," said Johnson. He rose and crushed out his cigarette. "Back to the grind, boys. Don't forget the big boss is watching."

The way he said it wasn't funny.

Back at his bench Solton continued his work, his hands moving as if he were a machine. He looked calm enough, outwardly, but inside his stomach felt full of butterflies and his heart pounded to the too-familiar fear. It was coming as he had known it would. The end could only be a matter of time.

He didn't like to think of that.

He reached for another specimen, adjusted it beneath the eyepieces, examined it, put it into a test tube, numbered it and reached for another. The pad beside him began to fill with neat, careful script, each notation followed by the number of the specimen. It was monotonous work but he didn't mind that. It gave him time to think.

He was still thinking when knock-off time came. . .

Slowly he stripped off his white coat and hung it on its peg. He was one of the last to enter the wash room where he laved his face and

hands, dried them, and walked down a short passage towards the locker room. From his locker he took his jacket, hat and raincoat, donned them, walked to the time-clock, punched his card then joined the thinning stream heading towards the main exit.

Hemridge called to him as he was striding down the road towards the bus station.

"Gregor! Give you a lift?" Hemridge owned one of the new, turbine engined convertibles, a flash, road-hugging piece of mechanism twice as large as it could have been and with more chromework than the average bar. Gregor hesitated then, as Hemridge opened the door, slipped into the front seat. The acceleration threw him hard against the upholstery.

"Nice piece of machinery," said Hemridge. "Only got it a couple of weeks ago."

"Very nice," said Gregor dutifully. Then, because that seemed lame, tried to become enthusiastic. "Plenty of power anyway. How fast does it go?"

"Hundred and fifty." Hemridge obviously wanted to show off. "Does ten to the gallon, crude oil naturally, and holds the road like a bridegroom hugging his bride." He lowered his foot and air whined over the windscreen. "See?"

"I see." Gregor hesitated. "What happens when it is all gone?"

"When what's all gone?"

"The oil. If you use a gallon for every ten miles, and all the other cars use the same, the oil isn't going to last very long, is it?"

"A philosopher," said Hemridge. He sat, his hands on the wheel, his eyes staring ahead down the winding ribbon of concrete. "When the oil's gone we'll find something else."

"What?"

"Atomic power maybe, solar power, elastic bands." Hemridge was curt. "I should worry. It'll last long enough for me."

Gregor caught the tone, recognised it, and knew he had made a mistake. He had criticised when he should have praised. Criticism was wrong, he should never criticise. He tried to repair the damage.

"It's a beautiful car," he said, and touched the gleaming fittings, the plastic upholstery, the superb finish. "A lovely car."

"I think so," said Hemridge, mollified. He glanced at his passenger. "Why don't you get one like it?"

"I can't," said Gregor. "I can't drive," he explained. "Traffic scares me."

"Most things seem to scare you," said Hemridge with the good-humour of a man at home with his environment. "You should get out a bit and enjoy yourself." He slowed as they entered the city.

"Tell you what, why don't you come over to my place tonight and have a beer? Johnson will be there with his girl and a couple of others." He winked. "Might even fix you a date. You got a girl?"

"No."

"Well then?"

"Some other time," said Gregor hastily. "I've got some work to do tonight, a thing I'm studying for, and I'm pretty booked up. Thanks all the same."

"Sure?" Hemridge didn't sound too upset at the refusal.

"Sure," said Gregor. The invitation could be as harmless as it sounded but, on the other hand, it could be a part of a subtle plot. The meeting and offer of a lift could have been accidental or Hemridge could have been waiting for his opportunity. It was impossible to tell.

The car slowed even more as it merged with the traffic and Gregor leaned forward.

"Drop me here," he said. "Anywhere along this road will do."

"Just as you like." Hemridge trod on the brakes and the big car whined to a halt. "See you tomorrow."

Gregor nodded, slammed the door, and stood watching as the car slid away. An hour later, after riding and walking almost all over town, he reached his apartment. It was in a big block of flats, the kind of place where no one knew anyone else and no questions were asked provided the rent was paid when due.

An automatic elevator took him to the fifth floor, disgorged him, and whined upwards in answer to a signal. Gregor watched it go, walked down a carpeted corridor to his apartment and halted outside his door. Before opening it he examined the jamb, looking for a thin, almost invisible thread stuck to the wood work. He found it, felt relief that it was unbroken, and twisted his key in the lock.

Inside he relaxed for the first time all day.

It was good to be home, to be surrounded by thick walls, to be away from curious eyes and watchful minds. Here, as yet, he was safe. He stared at a picture hanging on a wall, pursed his lips, went into the kitchen. He threw together a scratch meal of eggs, toast and coffee, ate it, threw the used dishes into the disposal chute. After the meal he went on a tour of inspection, testing the windows, the doors, searching for hidden wires or holes in the woodwork. Satisfied, he drew the curtains, switched on the lights and, from a cupboard, took a metal box. It was the size of a small suitcase, locked with a combination dial. Solton spun the combination, lifted the lid, folded down the sides and set to work.

At midnight he was still working.

George often thought that he should have been a detective. It wasn't that he was incapable of minding his own business but that, when confronted by a problem, his mind couldn't rest until it had found a solution. But first the problem had to intrigue him. That of Gregor Solton did.

A man, a normal man, just didn't catch cold so regularly. Solton had and so Solton was not a normal man. Not normal that is in the accepted sense. He could be an illness-prone, one of those unfortunate individuals who seemed to catch every germ flying around and act as a culture bed for their propagation. Or? It was the question mark which had placed the crease between George's eyes as he scanned the complete file on the technician.

For the man was, apparently, quite normal.

He had commenced working for General Radios a year ago at a time when automation seemed to be something which could only happen to others. Before that he had worked for a small concern which had merged with a large concern which had mechanised its factories. He had resigned. The job before that he had left when an electronic machine had rendered him redundant. The one before that . . .

George looked up from the file and stared at Lucy.

"How would you feel if everytime you became settled in a job you were kicked out because of automation?"

"I don't know?" She leaned over the desk, her perfume making her seem more attractive than ever. An effect which, naturally, it was designed to do. "Why?"

"Our friend Solton seems to have been chased by electrical monsters for quite some time." George ran his finger down the paper before him. "See? One job after the other, all ending when he was replaced by machines. The man seems to be a redundant-prone if there could be any such thing." He frowned thoughtfully at the file. "His previous job was with Sampson Utilities. Ring them up and ask for the personnel officer."

He flipped pages as Lucy made the connection, studying Solton's educational history, home life and general background. He was an orphan, had worked his way through college, and was, in effect, a self-made man. Lucy handed him the handset.

"Kersland, speaking," said George. "Personnel officer for General Radios. Can you give me some information on a previous employee of yours?" He smiled at Lucy as the phone made sounds against his ear. His opposite number in Sampson Utilities was, naturally, being cautious.

"Confidence guaranteed," assured George. "The man is Gregor Solton, technician, he worked for you just over a year ago. He resigned. I'd like to know if you would have kept him on had he stayed." He listened, making scratch marks on his pad. "No? Any reason? I see. Thank you. No, nothing like that. Just checking up. Thanks again." He hung up and stared at Lucy. "Our friend would not have been asked to stay on and a hint was dropped to that effect. Solton was not, at that time, protected by the union."

"Any reason?"

"Purely social. They regarded him as being a little queer. Kept himself to himself and didn't make any friends. But he was a good worker, nothing against him on that account." George looked thoughtful. "Malink is his section chief. I wonder . . .?" He reached for the phone.

"No," said Lucy and flushed. "People are curious," she explained, "and all calls from this office are considered important now that everyone is waiting for the axe. You might be overheard."

"I see." George wasn't too surprised, he had been in business long enough to know that the grapevine was startlingly efficient and that internal communications were liable to eavesdropping. He rose from his desk. "I'll drop down and see Malink myself." He glanced at his watch. "I should catch him in time for coffee."

"I'd better get on with making out the notices and cheques for the redundant staff," said Lucy. "Anything else you want me to do?"

George resisted making the obvious comment.

Malink wasn't too pleased to see George. As a key man the threat of redundancy didn't worry him and he saw no need to be polite. But he wasn't insulting either. He took George into his office, a half-glassed affair through the windows of which they could see the laboratory staff sitting around their coffee.

"Trouble?"

"No." George decided to be open about his visit. "Look, Malink, this isn't personal but I'd appreciate your co-operation. If redundancy hit your department which men would you prefer to lose?"

"None of them," said Malink promptly, then looked worried. "Is it that close?"

"It's coming," admitted George. "Glicker's cracking the whip and speeding up the conversion. As yet your boys are on the reserved list but, when automation is completed, they'll come under the axe. I thought that I'd sound you out, get your views. You should know better than I just who is the more expendable."

"It's a hell of a decision," said Malink. He opened the door of his office and yelled down the room. "Hey, Johnson! Bring a couple of coffees, will you." He waited until the technician had delivered the brew. Johnson stared curiously at George.

"Anything else?"

"No." Malink set the cups down on the table, offered cigarettes, lit them, sat down. "How many?"

"At a guess I'd say fifty-percent," said George. "Once the new models are in production little research will be necessary. Changes of design, things like that, but the basic model won't change."

"Not once the patterns are set," agreed Malink. He scowled at his cigarette. "I don't know that I can answer you."

"All right," said George. "There's time enough yet." He hesitated. "Would you keep Solton?"

"Gregor?" Malink looked surprised. "He's a good worker."

"Would you keep him?"

"I don't know. He's a queer bird, not like the others, but a good worker." He looked at George. "Why the interest in Solton?"

"Just curiosity. He's been sick quite a bit lately, hasn't he?"

"Just a cold or two. He doesn't let it worry him."

"Six colds," said George. "One a month every month." He stared at the section chief. "Odd, don't you think?" He pressed the point. "Why should he catch cold so regularly?"

"How should I know, I'm no doctor." Malink obviously didn't want to talk about it. "Maybe it was something in the vault. He could have an allergy, couldn't he?"

"He could," said George. "What's this vault business?"

"We keep the prototype components in a vault," explained Malink. "A big thing built of steel and lined with lead. The self-powered units are radioactive, harmless enough on their own but they have a cumulative effect. We take turns at stacking and checking them." He looked thoughtful. "Come to think of it Solton has missed his last few turns."

"Because he went sick?"

"Yes. Yes I guess that must be it." Malink picked up his cup and sipped his coffee. "Not that it's important. Johnson or Hemridge or one of the others took his turn so it didn't matter."

"You posted the duty-rota, of course?"

"Naturally." Malink set down his empty cup. "What are you getting at?"

"Nothing." George felt that he was getting at the heart of the mystery as to why Solton repeatedly went sick. Psychosomatic, of

course, it had to be. A defence mechanism to prevent him from entering the vault. But why? He became aware of Malink talking.

"I don't know why this curiosity about Solton but he's a good man. A queer bird maybe, but a brilliant worker. I've got him on the job of finalising the latest model." Malink became enthusiastic. "It's a sweet job. Self-powered, crystal reception, and neat design." He rose from his chair. "Come and have a look at it."

George wasn't really interested but he followed the chief from the office into the laboratory. General Radios manufactured a variety of receivers, concentrating on small portables with the accent on small. The set Malink picked from the bench was compact enough and light enough to be carried in a pocket.

"Neat," said the section chief. "It will wear out in about ten thousand hours and have to be replaced. Irreparable, of course, they have to buy new ones." He spun the edge of a knurled wheel which both controlled the on-off and volume. He waited a moment, twisted the tuning dial, frowned and called down the room. "Solton!"

"Yes, Mr. Malink?" Solton came towards them, his eyes blinking.

"This set doesn't work." Malink handed it to the technician. "Fix it, will you. I want to show Mr. Kersland how it sounds."

"I . . ." Solton took the set as if it had been red-hot. "This is the finalised model, Mr. Malink," he stammered. "I was breaking it down so as to have the components ready for the pattern-makers."

"All right," said Malink impatiently. "Let's hear it play." He looked sharply at the technician. "What's the matter? You ill or something?"

"No." Solton dabbed at his nose, making no effort to look at the set. Malink snatched it from him, opened it, squinted inside and grunted as he spotted a loose wire.

"These prototypes! The production job will have printed circuits so this can't happen." He took a thin screwdriver from his pocket, prodded at the loose wire, switched on and waited a few seconds. "Hear it?"

George nodded. The little radio had a surprisingly clear tone and, despite the small speaker, managed to give full register to bass and treble. But he was more interested in Solton.

The man looked physically ill.

His nose was getting red, his eyes watering, his shallow skin perspiring and flushed. He had every outward symptom of a man suffering from a heavy cold. He stared agonisingly at the set in Malink's hand. George stepped before him, took the set, listened to it, switched it off.

"Very nice," he said. "Thanks for letting me hear it. What happens now?"

"We break it down for the pattern-makers," said Malink. He nodded to Solton and the technician returned to his coffee. "Then the patterns are fed into the new installations in the factory to govern the machines. When we hit full-production those sets will stream out at the rate of a hundred an hour." He chuckled. "At the price we can sell them for we can keep making them until the machines wear out."

"I see." George was thoughtful, thinking more of Solton than the new production model. A cold to avoid going into the vaults? A psychosomatic cold induced by fear? Possibly, but then why should he have displayed the same symptoms when Malink had switched on the radio?

It was a problem which, as yet, he couldn't answer. He talked a while longer with the section chief, found out what he had wanted to know, and returned to his own office.

And found pandemonium.

The cause was as Lucy told him the incredible fact that the office computing machines were no longer functioning.

"I saw it happen," she said. "I'd taken the redundant file to the wage machine for the termination of employment cheques to be made out. The operator fed in the cards, started the machine, and the cards and made-out cheques began to spill into the tray. Everything was normal for the first ten cards and then the machine went haywire."

"In what way?"

"The cards came out but no cheques." Lucy was excited.

"Did the operator call the technician?" George was practical.

"Yes. She tried to clear the machine a couple of times then gave up. Just about then all the other operators began to call the technicians, their machines had gone wrong too."

"I see." George listened to the faint buzz of sound from the main office. With their machines inoperative the operators had nothing to do and, in the manner of all idle staff, filled in the gap with conversation, speculation and gossip. "Does Gliker know about this?"

"I think so. Why?"

"No reason. Just when did this happen?"

"A little while ago while you were in the laboratory." Lucy giggled, a strange sound for one so mature. "Suppose the machines have really broken down? Permanently I mean. What a mess!"

"Mess is right," said George. He stepped towards the door. "I'm going to see Gliker."

He found the efficiency expert arguing on the phone and waited until he had finished. Before he could speak a technician rushed in, laid a paper on the desk and rushed out again. Glicker picked it up, saw George, scowled and reached for the phone.

"I want to talk to you," said George. He sat down, lit a cigarette, and smiled at the harrassed expert. "I can wait while you phone."

"I won't be a minute," said Glicker. He was a little longer than that, his conversation, even to George, sounding a little abrupt. He slammed down the receiver, looked at the paper again, then remembered his visitor. "What is it?"

"I've heard that the computers in the office have gone haywire," said George. "Have they?"

"Yes." Glicker hesitated then decided to be frank. "I've never known anything like it before. Every machine failing at the same time."

"How?"

"That's the weird part about it," confessed Glicker. "Apparently there's nothing wrong, mechanically wrong that is, but the machines simply fail to work." He pulled at his collar. "I just can't understand how it happened."

"I asked the wrong question," said George. "Let me put it this way. Why aren't the machines functioning?"

"I can't be sure," said Glicker. "I still can't believe it could happen." He looked at George. "You know something about computers?"

"A little, yes."

"Then you know what I'm talking about when I mention memory banks." Glicker looked as if he wanted to be ill. "Some machines use punched cards, others use magnetised tape, the majority use magnetised drums. We use the latest, magnetised-drum system. We can store more data that way and the machines are more efficient. Most installations use magnetised tape or drum now."

"Get to the point," said George. "What happened?"

"I wish I knew," said Glicker. "I've run what tests I can but it will take a company expert to give the final answer. Luckily one was superintending the factory installations and I've put him on the job. It seems incredible but everything points to the fact that, somehow, the drums have lost their magnetism." He swallowed. "If they have it's most unfortunate. Most unfortunate indeed."

Which, in a way, was nothing less than a crashing understatement.

The magnetised drums of the computing machines held all the data normally occupied by several thousand files, ledgers and account books. They held every scrap of data necessary to the running of an entire

business; from a record of time-keeping and staff to the smallest retailer wanting supplies; from details of insurance to the amounts of raw materials in stock, on order, and undergoing process. Without that data General Radios couldn't even write a cheque, ship an order, pay off staff. As Lucy had said, it was a mess.

"Trouble," said George. "How soon before you can be certain?"

"Not long. The specialist is working on it now. Why?"

"Isn't it obvious? With the office staff cut to the bone how are we going to handle the paper-work? Without time-keepers and salary clerks how are we going to meet the payroll? And shipping? And a dozen other things." George crushed out his cigarette. "We've got to get organised."

"It isn't as bad as all that," protested Gliker. "We still have the original records and can restore the memory banks."

"Sure, in time, but how much time do we need?" George climbed to his feet. "It will take weeks, months even to go through the cards, translate them, correlate them and have them translated again for the computers. Our records aren't kept in longhand, remember, and no one that I know of can work direct from the record cards. Without those memory banks we are blind, deaf and dumb. I can't take the risk of you being wrong. I've got to get some staff lined up right away."

"Must you?" Gliker looked unhappy. "Can't you wait for the expert's findings?"

"I'll wait," promised George. "But it's going to take time to locate good staff, typewriters, human-operated calculators and other office equipment. We've got to start from almost the bottom."

George got back to his office just in time to grab the phone as it began to ring. It was Thorpe.

"George? That man you were asking about has just reported sick again."

"Solton?" George had a mental image of the thin, stooped, pale-faced man. "A cold?"

"Yes, how did you guess?"

"I saw it coming." George hesitated, his mind buzzing with nebulous suspicions. "Look, Thorpe, will you do me a favour?"

"If I can. What is it?"

"Release him and follow him."

"What!"

"Sign him as unfit for work and send him home," explained George patiently. "Then follow him. You've got a car, haven't you?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"I can't explain just now," said George. "I don't even know if I've got a good reason for asking you to do this. It's just an idea. Will you do it?"

"Why not?" Thorpe chuckled. "Anything to get away from this place for a while. You'll accept full responsibility, of course? Make it an official absence?"

"Certainly. Ring me back when you've trailed him home. Right?" "Right."

George hung up, slowly dropping the handset back onto its stand. Even now he didn't know just why he had asked the doctor to trail the technician. He dismissed the problem as Gliker entered the office. The efficiency expert looked stunned, like a man who has just seen his firmest beliefs shattered before his eyes. The reason was simple.

Every memory bank in the building had, somehow, been wiped clean of all recorded data.

Solton knew that the phone call concerned him even though Thorpe, with his Judas smile, had been careful to make a lying excuse. He had been too affable, too ready to alibi himself, too eager to smooth suspicions. The technician shifted uncomfortably on his chair as the doctor fussed and fumbled with his drugs and files. Thorpe was taking far too long and time was running out.

Time! Solton felt the too-familiar fear grip his stomach as he thought about it. He had been careful, very careful, but bad luck and circumstances had caught up with him. He had to get away before it was too late.

He sneezed and dabbed at his watering eyes. His head felt like a balloon, his skin burned, he wanted to crawl into a hole and hide himself away from everyone. Thorpe looked at him, his eyes suspicious, and reached for a glass rod surmounted by a ball of cotton wool.

"Odd how you keep catching cold," said Thorpe. "I've been studying your record and you seem to be a martyr to coryzia." He reached forward with the swab. "I'll just take a specimen of your nasal discharge and then you can go home and get to bed."

"Thank you." Solton sat while the doctor took his sample, bottled it in a test tube, marked it, put it in a rack. "I'll be all right."

"Sure you will." Thorpe reached for a jar and spilled a handful of white tablets into an envelope. "Take two of these ever four hours with plenty of water." He smiled. "Don't look so scared, you've had them before and they won't hurt you. Get plenty of rest and go easy on the solids." He scribbled on a pad. "Here, hand this to the time-keeper as you check out. Have you a car?"

"No."

"Just as well, you're not in a fit state to drive." Thorpe glanced at his watch. "If you care to wait a little while I'll take you home. I've got to go into town for some supplies."

"No thank you." Solton felt the sweat beading his forehead. Waiting was the one thing he dared not do. "I'll be all right."

"Just as you wish." Thorpe didn't press the point. He handed Solton the drugs and the slip of paper and nodded in dismissal. "Off you go, then. Let me see you when you report back."

He waited for a few minutes after Solton had left, changed into his outdoor clothes, left the office. He by-passed the time-clocks, walked to the car park and sat in his car. His eyes were good and he had no trouble spotting Solton as he left the building. Starting the engine he eased the car from the parking ground, halted in the driveway, and waited until the technician had boarded a bus or town. Thorpe, as he followed the bus, was smiling.

It was the first time he had ever played at detective.

Solton wasn't smiling. He twisted in his seat and stared behind him, his eyes anxious. Logic told him that now he was safe. No one could have any real suspicions and no one would be following him. But logic, as usual, had no power to calm his fears. Desperately he tried to sit and think and gain peace of mind. He couldn't. He twisted and turned and scanned the road behind him with watering eyes while his heart thudded and pounded within his chest. A normal man would have spotted the doctor almost at once but Solton wasn't normal. He couldn't concentrate and, like a shotgun blast, his suspicions were too widely scattered to be really effective.

To him a car was a car, he was unable to recognise the various makes and ages, his eyes were too weak to spot the numbers, and the traffic too heavy for any one car to stand out. Also Thorpe was crafty. He drove past the bus, watched it in his rear view mirror, slowed, left the road and returned to it, and did all the things which instinct and intelligence dictated.

Solton left the bus far before his usual stop and stood for a while at the edge of the pavement, his eyes busy as they looked for signs of suspicious activity. He didn't know what he was looking for and so, naturally, he found things to fit. A man stared hard at him and Solton cringed. A woman glanced at him then, her curiosity awakened by his flushed face and taut expression, looked again. A man dressed in working clothes bumped into him, muttered an apology, and walked on.

It was too much. They were all around him, watching him, closing in. Solton felt almost sick with fear as he imagined the countless eyes, the countless accusations. He had to get away, to hide, to shut

himself in behind thick walls. He stepped forward, signalled a cab, gasped his address as he sank against the cushions. It was a risk but it couldn't be helped. He felt ill, too ill to walk and stare and detour as he usually did. He wanted to get home.

The thread was unbroken when he arrived at his apartment. He examined it, opened the door, let it shut behind him, the automatic lock making a welcome click. He felt tired and wanted to rest but, before he could relax, he scoured the walls and windows, peered into cupboards and behind the furniture, looking for the tell-tale wires or holes. He found none and, going to the windows took a last look at the streets below.

A car stood in the street, a man by the car, and Solton recoiled from the window. He drew the curtains, opened the cupboard where he kept the metal box and placed it on the table. He fumbled in his pockets and found the envelope of drugs, stared at them, threw them away. They could be harmless and they could be poison. He didn't intend taking any chances.

Opening the box he sat down and set to work.

George was as busy as a man could be and was loving every minute of it. Lucy, her face flushed with exertion, was busy at one of the phones calling a long list of friends, relations and ex-employees. George himself had managed to obtain a supply of typewriters, simple calculators and other obsolete office equipment. He had also managed to obtain authority for three members of the staff to sign cheques. The abrupt swing from a fully mechanised office to one using all-human labour wasn't easy but it had to be done.

"We'll have this place humming by tomorrow," he said. "Glicker can allocate the work and the section chiefs can supervise, teach, answer questions. By the time we get the computers working again we'll be back to normal."

"Then everyone gets paid off again, I suppose." Lucy was cynical. George smiled.

"Remember the agreement with the union? If staff are rendered redundant by automation they are entitled to six months pay. I've already seen Wendle about it and he's going to make it stick. All staff employed to fill the gap will come in for the full benefit." He leaned back in his chair. "But that isn't the end of it. If the machines can let us down once they can again. No business the size of this one can afford such disorganisation. In sheer self-protection we shall have to retain a working staff for emergencies. It looks as if we're going to stay in business."

"That's wonderful!" Lucy's eyes were shining. "That means that people can hold their jobs, even on a stand-by basis. The machines are more efficient, of course, but we can use them too." Her face clouded. "That is if the bosses let us."

"They will," said George. "A little extra on the price of our products will attend to the salary side and, with both human staff and machines, we can become so efficient that the extra pay will be more than compensated by increased sales and service." He chuckled. "Even Glicker will have to admit that now. He can't defend his beloved machines after this."

The phone rang, Lucy picked it up, listened, handed it to George.

"Doctor Thorpe," she said. "Personal."

"Thanks." George took the handset and lifted it to his ear. He had almost forgotten the doctor and the job he had given him. "Hello?"

"George?" Thorpe made blowing sounds in the receiver. "I've tracked your man."

"Solton?" George reached for a pencil. "Good. Where is he?"

"Home, I guess. 518, Montrose Apartments. It's a big block of flats just off Green Street. I checked and he's lived there for almost nine months." Thorpe sounded disgusted. "You could have got that information from your files."

"Could I?" George fumbled among the papers on his desk, found what he was looking for, grunted at the answer. "No, I couldn't. His address is given as something quite different."

"So he moved," said Thorpe. "So what?"

"So he should have told us," said George. "No reason for a man to hide his address from his employers unless . . ." He paused, frowning, his mind toying with incredulity. "Thanks, Doctor. You can go home now."

"Like hell I can." Thorpe sounded annoyed. "You got me into this thing, George and I want to stay in it. What's it all about? Why should I trail Solton? What gives with him anyway?"

"I don't know."

"But you intend finding out, right?"

"Yes," admitted George. He twisted his wrist, stared at his watch.

"Look, I'm just about finished here. Where can I meet you?"

"I'm parked across the street," said Thorpe. "There's a swank bar a couple of doors away. That's where I am now. That's where you'll find me."

He hung up and George repeated the action. He glanced around the office, saw that everything was under control, went to the closet and took out his hat and coat.

Thirty minutes later he had joined Thorpe in a drink.

The doctor was a big, jovial, red-faced man with a ready laugh and an ingrained cynicism. He swallowed his beer and stared at George. They sat in an alcove, a secluded place with soundproof partitions and dim lighting. It was too early for the regulars and they had the place almost to themselves.

"Talk," said the doctor. "Talk straight and talk fast."

"And if I don't?"

"I'll blackmail you, poison you, make some wild guesses." Thorpe shrugged. "Take your choice. You've aroused my curiosity and now you've got to satisfy it."

"I wish I could," said George. He looked thoughtfully into his glass. "About the colds. They're psychosomatic, I found that out. Every time Solton gets scared he gets a cold. Does that make sense?"

"Anything makes sense if you look at it from the right viewpoint," said Thorpe. "I've known a man to have a paralysed arm because he struck his wife in anger. He felt guilty about it and so lost the use of his arm. He didn't know why and neither did anyone else. He was making medical history when a hypnotist put him under, learned the reason, and cured him by suggestion. The point is that his affliction only made sense if you looked at it the right way."

"So Solton gets a cold because he is scared. The colds provide a good, water-tight reason for him to leave work and go home. Then he gets better. So the reason for his fear must be connected with his work." George tasted his beer. "The question is What? I found out that whenever he is due to work in the vaults he goes sick and misses his turn. The components in the vaults are slightly radioactive and it is possible that he has an exaggerated fear of radiation. But today he wasn't due to go into the vaults at all and yet he went sick. Genuine?"

"It looked like it," said Thorpe. "I took a test swab but I haven't had time to examine it. But he had all the symptoms of a cold." He looked at George. "But you know that, you said you saw it coming."

"Did I?" George frowned, throwing back his memory. "So I did. It . . ." He sat up and stared at the doctor.

The pieces had suddenly fallen into place.

The sound of the doorbell was a knife stabbing into his heart. Solton jumped, gasped, waited for the sound to die. It did, only to be repeated a second, third, a fourth time. Whoever it was wanted him to open the door.

Panic became a real and living thing, numbing his limbs, closing his throat, making his heart pound and his skin go cold and clammy with the sweat of fear. He wished desperately that the caller, whoever

it was, would go away. The jangle of the doorbell told him that his wish was not going to be granted.

"Who is it?" His voice was a croak. He wet his lips and tried again. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Package for you, sir." The voice was unrecognisable, distorted by the door. "Special delivery."

A package? The words didn't make sense but, as he thought about it, hope grew warm and comforting within him. He touched the machine on the table, the assortment of wires and transistors, condensers and special components over which he had laboured so long. Perhaps?

He smiled and rose and went to the door. He opened it, swung it wide, and almost died of fear as George and Thorpe entered.

"You!" He sucked air into his lungs, his eyes flickering like those of a trapped animal. "You tricked me."

"We had to," said George. He closed the door behind him. "It was the only way to get you to open the door." He glanced about the apartment, stared at the picture on the wall, stepped towards the table.

"Don't touch that!" Solton sprang before his machine. "What do you want?" Fear had reached zenith and desperation had come to the rescue.

"To talk," said George soothingly. "Only to talk." He glanced at Thorpe. "We are your friends, both of us, and we want to help you in your work." He smiled, the smile of a man who knows and understands everything. "You should have confided in us before."

"You know?" Something seemed to run out of the technician and he slumped in his chair. "The radio, of course, I should have been more careful."

"It wasn't your fault," said George and hoped that Thorpe wouldn't interrupt. "It was just bad luck."

"I should have dismantled it sooner," said Solton. "But I had to make the final tests. I didn't think that Malink would want to hear it play again and I'd changed the wires. I had to, you know, just in case."

"I know," said George, and wished that he spoke the truth.

"I knew what would happen when he switched it on," said Solton. "Was it very bad?"

"It was effective," said George. "But no one guesses that you were responsible."

"And the radio?"

"No one knows that either."

"No," said Solton. "They couldn't, could they? The power is small and the range limited, but it was the best I could do. Inverse

squares, you know, there is no way around it." He sighed. "An interesting effect but of little real value. I stumbled on it while testing the alloys. We wanted a metallic ink which would deteriorate over a period of time. I chose a special combination of slightly radioactive material, used it as a power source, and managed to accelerate deterioration. It was only by chance that I found it emitted a signal which affected magnetism. It is very weak, you understand, it wouldn't affect things like electro-magnets."

"I understand," said George. "But it does affect the magnetic memory banks of the office computers and data machines. It distorts them so that the signals are jumbled and, in effect, wipes them clean." He hesitated. "Why did you do it?"

"To gain time," said Solton. His eyes flickered to the picture on the wall. "I must gain time. I can escape if only I can gain time enough to contact the others. But everyone is against me, they watch and they plan and they try to trip me up. I have to keep moving and stay on guard and it's hard to stay free and it's getting harder all the time." His voice had risen and his hands had begun to tremble.

"Relax," soothed George. "We aren't going to hurt you."

"Yes you are. Everyone wants to hurt me. You're all against me. I've got to escape."

"We'll help you," said George. He wasn't enjoying this.

"You can't help me, only the others can do that." Solton touched the machine on the table. "I try and try and try but they don't answer. I keep calling them but they won't reply." He began to cry, his face all twisted as if he were a baby. "Now you've found me and it's too late. It's all too late."

"Relax," said Thorpe. He stepped forward, an injector in his hand. Before Solton could struggle the doctor had snapped the tip, pressed it through his clothing into his arm and pressed the release. He stood back, waiting, the empty injector in his hand.

"Got me," said Solton. His eyes were glazed as the drug took effect. "Got . . ."

Thorpe caught him as he fell.

"Paranoia." Thorpe shook his head as he stared around the apartment. "One of the clearest cases I've seen."

George nodded. The ambulance had come and taken Solton away to where the doctors and specialists, the hypnotists and modern psychologists would, with the aid of drugs and suggestions, cure his delusion.

"It all fits," said Thorpe. He stared at the picture on the wall. It showed a man, naked and in obvious agony, pinned to blood-soaked dirt by the long, thin, impersonal leg of a man-like robot.

The robot was just a machine, the man bore a striking resemblance to Solton.

"Persecution mania," said George. "He was an introvert, an orphan, shy and unwanted. He tried hard to make a place for himself but each time he cut himself a niche he was kicked out by the machines. Naturally he hated them. Naturally he thought of them, and the men who served them, as his personal enemy. And with more and more machines taking over he must have felt like a rat in a trap with the walls closing in all around him."

"So he tried to hit back," said Thorpe softly. "Didn't he?"

"Yes." George looked at the doctor. "All right, Thorpe, if you don't know about it now you will soon enough. Solton has designed a radio receiver which, when switched on, transmits a signal that wipes clean the magnetised memory banks of any computer within range." He paused. "That set is scheduled for immediate production. The prototype is finished and the master-patterns being made. Within a few weeks the country will be flooded with them."

"Unless we stop them," reminded Thorpe. He looked at the picture on the wall. "Symbolism sometimes holds more than a grain of truth."

"Yes," said George. "But forget that. Think of the depression just around the corner. Think of the men and women, all geared to top spending, being thrown out of work with a load of unpaid debts before them. Then think of the machines which have somehow turned from being the slave into the master."

"I'm thinking," said Thorpe.

"We've engaged a full office staff at General Radios," said George. "Two hundred men and women to fill in because the machines have failed. I'd like to keep them."

"Not all machines use magnetised memory banks."

"No one wants to get rid of machines," said George. "But we must learn to live with them. Eventually someone will discover what is causing the breakdowns and shield against it, or adjust to it, or use a different system. That doesn't matter. The important thing is that people will have learned that it is suicidal to dispense with all the staff. So we keep on a stand-by staff for emergencies. The machines take care of the routine but the men and women reap the benefit."

"Utopia," said Thorpe, but he wasn't sneering.

"Why not?" George moved restlessly about the apartment. "We can stop the production of those radios, yes, but what happens then? The thing is buried, forgotten, and we rush headlong into the depression. Or we can forget about them and wait while installation after installation suddenly, and for no apparent reason, goes haywire. Once employers lose their faith in the machines human staff come into their own again." He stopped walking about and stared at Thorpe.

"All right, so it's temporary. But automation is coming too fast and we need a breathing space to adjust to it. Solton has given us the opportunity for that. After the fuss and scare has died down things may be different. One thing is for certain, they couldn't be worse." He looked at the doctor. "It's up to you."

"They'll hang us if they ever find out," said Thorpe slowly. "Sabotage, treason, they'll throw the book at us. Are you willing to risk that?"

"Yes."

"On the other hand we might get a bonus for spilling what we know. A man could get married on a big bonus." Thorpe looked at George. "He could marry his secretary, for example."

"I'd like to get married," said George. "Lucy's a fine woman, but I want more than that. I want to know that I've given her security. I don't want a bonus which may lose its value through inflation. I want something to rely on, but forget about me. Think of the big picture."

He began to pace the room again, restlessly, impatient with the doctor for taking his time and annoyed with himself for having allowed Thorpe to learn the secret. Solton was a paranoid, he could rave his head off and no one would pay any attention. Thorpe was different. Thorpe carried authority. George looked at him as the doctor rose to his feet.

"It's getting late," he said. "Let's get out of here."

"What about the radios?"

"What radios?" Thorpe looked blank. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Fair enough." George didn't argue. Let the doctor play safe, it didn't matter. His denial was its own safeguard but his silence would be as effective as his co-operation. George collected his hat and paused by the machine on the table. "I wonder what Solton was trying to do with this?"

"He told you," said Thorpe. "He was impatient to get home. He wanted to escape, he couldn't while on earth so he built this gadget to call some mythical superior race who apparently live in space. It's just a toy, an elaboration of his paranoia. It doesn't mean anything."

"No," said George. "Of course not." Idly he touched a switch, moved a control, fiddled with a wire. The set crackled, hummed, came to life.

"Come on," said Thorpe. "I'm going."

He led the way into the passage, George following, and the door slammed behind them. In the apartment the set, forgotten in the hurry, spluttered and hummed. After a long while a voice rapped from the speaker. A hard, arrogant, demanding voice.

Totally unhuman.

—Alan Guthrie.

There have been scores of variations written around the "magic lamp" theory but it seems that such stories will always remain fresh and readable as long as authors produce interesting reasons for the wish-fulfilment of the characters in such stories. As in the following story.

THE COFFEE POT

By JOSEPH SLOTKIN

"It isn't the job," young Tom Armistead told his wife, Betty. "It's just the future it doesn't have."

He poured his third cup of breakfast coffee. A little sloshed over into the saucer. "If I could only see ahead a little bit. Be sure that a year from now, five years from now—"

Betty clicked together the empty dishes. The energy in her round, firm arms went to them, and they sounded like bright high heels trotting hopefully. She slipped them into the suds. They both watched them nestling and settling as if the gleaming sink were a warm, new bed.

"Some day," she said and her voice, like her, was firm and vibrated air gracefully, "some day you'll be more than just a junior clerk, dear."

Tom sipped his steaming-hot brew. He glowed a bit. "Say, this is good! Seems to get better all the time."

Young-wife Betty turned from the sink. She brushed back a wisp of hair that honey might have looked like if it were to be spun in sunlight. Her even teeth white against lips like strawberries in season.

"Self-appreciation, dear?" Her mouth told him her smile might go to pout.

"Huh?"

"The coffee. I suppose when I make it you think it's too strong, or too weak, or too stale, or something too . . . But when you—"

"Didn't you brew this pot?" Tom stared at her. It wasn't hard to do.

She looked at him. "How could I? You got up before me *this* morning."

"You mean it's left over from last night?"

"You *saw* me wash it out with the supper dishes, darling."

As a matter of fact, he hadn't. He had seen her at the sink, and he hadn't seen the sink. Which would *you* rather look at: a young new wife or an old sink?

They were both silent a moment. Tom sipped, sipped. He looked at the pot. His eyes narrowed.

It was just an old aluminium eight-cup percolator, streaked on the sides, sitting now on its asbestos pad atop the tiny rollaway kitchen table. Tom and Betty had had a glass vacuum coffee maker, several, in fact, until they tired of breaking them.

Then one late afternoon Tom had come home with this metal pot, purchased at a little "variety" store that had blossomed out of nowhere near the place where he put eight hours of his energy into crawly little inky figures on endless ledgers five die-pressed days a week.

It sat now, this coffee pot, innocently on the table, a faint white vapour lazily curling from its short spout.

Tom shrugged. "Well, one of us had to make it, that's a cinch." He drained his cup, handed it to Betty.

She took it, frowning. Suddenly she turned, and staring at the pot suspiciously, disregarding the suds streaming along her dimpled forearm, she pointed at it and said with feminine, stubborn logic, "If *you* didn't make it, and *I* didn't make it, why is there coffee in that pot?"

Tom shrugged again. "Who knows? Magic, maybe. Say, think I'll have another half-cup at that. Stuff is *good*."

"Ought to be, at these prices," Betty said, handing him a clean but still dripping cup.

He poured the black, fragrant liquid into the cup, hefted the pot experimentally, then filled the cup. Elaborately ignoring Betty's round-eyed, accusing stare, he added milk from the pitcher. He lifted, tilted, the pungent heat hit roof of mouth and caressed palate, slid down so stimulatingly. He grinned.

"*Must* be magic," he commented. "Pot still feels full. Ever notice —" he began, sipping with luxurious satisfaction, "— how an old pot seems to stay full longer than you'd ever believe possible?"

"Ah, the old things are best, really—improve with age. And I'll bet it was sitting in that dusty old store where I bought it since before the war."

"But the price you paid for it was new," Betty flipped back.

"Now take this pot," Tom said, ignoring her witticism. "I could swear we both had a couple of cups last night. And yet this morning—"

Quietly, firmly, dangerously, Betty's voice came from the sink: "I washed it out last night."

Tom chuckled, adjusted the pot lingeringly on the asbestos pad, hefted it experimentally again, set it down lovingly.

"Now, darling, if you're afraid I'll bawl you out for not making a fresh pot this morning—"

"Tom Armistead, you stop that this minute! I've had enough of your teasing." Betty raised a suds-soaked finger and flicked away an embryo tear. "You got up before me this morning, brewed a pot of coffee, and now you're taking this way of telling me that I should have had it all ready for you."

Sagely, with the experience of months/years of married life behind him, Tom regarded her. He rose quickly, took her in his arms, and held her wet hands tightly. "Now, dear," he said gently, and kissed her between each word. "I forgive you." He laughed.

"I won't have it! I won't have you forgiving me, when there's nothing to forgive!" Betty cried. "You and your old superior-husband ways. Well, you can just make your own coffee every morning if you're so smart!"

She whirled out of his arms and caught up the pot, pausing just a very fraction of a second as its unexpected weight sagged her arm a bit.

"Here, look at it!" she cried. "See? You always make it this way—too strong!"

She tilted it viciously over the drain part of the sink, and as it began to gurgle out, pointed to the black column of steaming liquid.

"Isn't that just the way you make it? Too much coffee? Not enough water? Perked too long, strong as—!"

For a moment there was a frozen tableau, broken only by the rhythmic gurgle of the coffee from the pot, the gulping as the drain received it, and a slight splashing sound. Betty looked at Tom. He was staring from her to the pot to the sink, then back at her again.

Her hand was rigid over the sink, and for interminably long seconds the coffee poured and poured . . .

. . . and poured.

Tom slowly, fluidly, as though moving in a dream, extended both hands towards her, palms down, as though placating, and finally managed to mumble:

"Don't — don't do anything! Don't — upset —!"

But Betty had stared at her hand, holding the pot, as though it were grasping a live snake, and suddenly she set the pot down hard in the sink and ran into Tom's arms. The bottom of the pot hit with a "clink," and there was a hissing sound as it touched the wet porcelain.

"Oh, Tom, it's — it's —!"

Over her quaking shoulder Tom glared at the pot. Then he gently disengaged Betty's arms, stiffened his back, advanced slowly toward the sink, swallowed hard—

—and picked up the pot.

Its handle nestled snugly against his palm. Innocently, its contents gurgled, and white vapour curled sinuously from its short spout. He hefted it.

While Betty stood back, her hand to her mouth, Tom put in the drain plug, tilted the pot, and poured.

And poured. And poured—

And poured. His head nodded rhythmically, his fascinated eyes on the steady stream gurgling from the spout. The black level in the steaming sink rose. And rose.

And rose, and when the sink was full, he hefted the pot.

It gurgled.

He set it down on the drainboard without a word. He turned to Betty. They looked at each other. He turned to the sink, pointed his right forefinger at the full sink, lowered it gently into the blackness, winced at the heat.

He withdrew his finger, put it into his mouth and sucked at it. Foolishly, he drew it out, simpered helplessly at Betty, said :

"It's—coffee."

That did it. With a wail, she was in his arms again. For a moment, Tom looked as though he were about to start crying, too. Then, manfully, he pushed her to arm's length, held her there, and gazed steadily into her streaming blue eyes.

"Now. Let's just take this easy, dear. Let's not allow this—this thing to get the better of us." Betty's tears began to lessen as she watched the flicks of froth bubbling at the corners of her husband's mouth.

"Whatever it is, we mustn't get excited," Tom said.

He sat down hard.

Betty looked at the drainboard out of the corner of her eye. "You're late for work," she said.

Slowly, Tom said, "I don't care if I *am* wate for lurk. I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

He perked up. "That's it. It *has* no bottom."

"B-but—*everything* has a bottom ! It must have a bottom. It—it's—*sitting* on it !" Betty flung herself onto his lap, looked at him, her eyes round as saucers, blue as empty sky.

Tom began to mutter, half to himself. "For everything, there's a reason, no matter how nu— Look, darling, maybe it's like one of

those—those science things where something comes from—from another world, or—”

Betty, who had been taking trips to the library and the newsstand for the past six months, caught on almost at once.

“Another dimension,” she whispered. “It’s partly in this dimension, partly in some world where—”

“Where everything’s coffee,” Tom said, gaping idiotically.

She looked at him, “But why?”

Tom shook his head. “Ours not to reason why. Ours but to drink, and—!” He stood up so suddenly Betty fell onto the floor.

“Omygosh!” he said. He stared hard at the rippling indigo in the sink. “At fourpence—sixpence a cup . . . darling, how many cups does that sink hold?”

“I don’t know. I—I never poured coffee into it before.”

“Well, suppose it’s fifty. At sixpence a cup, that’s—that’s twenty-five bob!”

They both looked at the pot. The indefatigable pot. The vapour was still rising in a thin thread from the spout.

Slowly, warily, Tom took first one step toward it, then another. He advanced cautiously on the drainboard. His hand grasped the handle firmly. He tilted the pot.

It gurgled merrily, then obligingly poured.

And poured . . . and poured . . .

“Wait!” Betty cried. She got up off the floor and ran toward the sink. “It’s flowing over!”

She reached in her hand to pull out the plug, then withdrew it with a “Yipe!” Tom looked at her.

“It—it’s still hot,” she said, holding her limp, red hand dripping over the sink.

Tom took her fragrant, warm hand, and licked the palm. “Still tastes good. Just the way I make it,” he said.

They both laughed. He took her onto his lap again, and they sat there, staring at the old aluminium percolator with its faint white plume of vapour twisting and curling from the spout.

“We’ve got to figure this out carefully,” he said.

Betty was far ahead of him. “We can serve the coffee free with meals,” she said. “That’s better than just selling it for—maybe sixpence a cup, or even a penny a cup. That way, people will come into our restaurant just for the novelty of getting something for nothing.

“And it will serve those—old coffee speculators right!” she said fiercely. “Maybe teach them a lesson.”

“Maybe that’s why this happened,” Tom said, staring into space.

They were both silent again. Tom said, “I make ten Pounds a week. We pay seven a month for the house. There’s the car—”

They sat there, thinking of how much it cost to start a restaurant. They looked at each other. They both said, at once :

"Uncle John !"

Then they both shook their heads, smiling. "Can you imagine me taking that old pot in to Uncle John and saying, 'I want to borrow two thousand or so to start a good restaurant because this pots' either partly in the fourth dimension or enchanted some way, Uncle John' ? Remember what he told me last time I—?"

"Yoooth, dat's de time to plannnn !" Betty said, mimicking Uncle John's nasal, dry twang.

"Maybe," Tom speculated, "it would be better to keep it just between ourselves at that." He looked at the pot with growing apprehension.

"It might peter out. We'd better try it for a while, first."

Six weeks, and one thousand gallons of coffee later, Tom was still a junior clerk at Karkins Perkins, and Cole, Incorporated. His bank balance, after paying the November bills, was exactly £31.

And the insurance premium was due December 15th.

Three months, and ten thousand of the magic gallons later, Tom had a nodding acquaintance with every banker, investor and restaurant man in town. The streaked, steaming short-spouted pot, like the fabled drinking horn of Utgard-Loki in Jotunheim, land of the Giants, that Thor could not empty because one end was invisibly dipped into the ocean, still gurgled and poured and poured and poured obligingly when it was tilted.

"Perhaps," Betty often mused, "because one end is invisibly dipped into a fourth dimensional ocean of coffee somewhere . . ."

Tom made a trip to the downtown home store when, for some reason, he couldn't find the dusty, musty dark little "variety" store he had bought the first pot from—and now the bottomless pot had a twin, which became empty right on schedule.

And they locked the pot that poured and poured and poured in the cupboard which had previously been graced with Betty's two-place setting of sterling, the Queen Anne bedspread, and the set of Limoges she had got as a wedding gift from Uncle John.

Once a week they unlocked it, tilted it over the drainboard and poured and poured, and poured. Ceremoniously, they each poured a cup for themselves, tasted it gingerly, for it was always so hot, smacked their lips, looked at each other and smiled.

Then they locked it away in the cupboard, next to the Limoges china. And Tom got out the bankbook, the budget, and the books on Successful Restaurant Management.

And they studied, added, subtracted, figured, calculated—and waited.

When little Jill came along, one of the first things they did, after Betty came back from the hospital, wan and thin, was to unlock the cupboard, pour each other a cup of steaming black brew, and drink solemnly and ceremoniously to their firstborn.

"And to the future," said Tom, wanly and thinly, glancing at the desk where their bankbook and the receipted bills for doctor, hospital and layette lay, atop the much-fingered, dogeared and coffee-stained budget book and manual on Successful Restaurant Management.

Half a million gallons later, Tom became Head Clerk at the firm, and the father of Tom, Jr., Carrie, and John (who didn't look at all like his uncle, Heaven be praised).

In the early hours of the morning, or while the children were at school, the black brew poured into the ceremonial cups, and Betty pushed back a lock of hair the colour of crystallized honey, patting Tom's hand just over the big vein that was beginning to stand out thick and purple now.

And her hand trembled a bit, as she locked the streaked aluminium pot, its vapour still curling lazily over the spout, back into the cupboard next to the chipped and cracked Limoges china.

The black brew poured. And poured. It poured, secretly, in the stillness of the night. It poured between the proud parents, the steam rising fragrant against the slightly-pinched nostrils of the smiling woman with hair the colour of clover blossoms bees made honey from—and misted the thick spectacles of the man with the purple-veined, brown-splotched hands that trembled as he held the letter from Tom, Jr., telling of the birth of their third grandchild.

They looked at each other, then. They looked at the streaked pot. They smiled. Happily, at each other, they smiled . . . wearily, perhaps. And a bit bewildered.

Old Tom said: "We're not going to start any restaurant now."

"I know it," Betty said.

". . . It's still good coffee," Tom said.

"Just—" little Betty said, and her smile was every bit as sweet as when her lips were rosebuds waiting for the bees, "—the way you always made it—too strong, not enough water, black—"

They were silent in the strangely-quiet house, listening to the echoes of their memories . . . listening to the laughter of the little children who had pattered about the cupboard, chipped the china, scratched the silver, shredded the bedspread—grown, married and left—without ever knowing.

A man and his wife, after all, are entitled to at least *one* secret.

The old woman coughed, and her husband looked at her anxiously. She smiled, reassuringly.

"I was just thinking," she said, her voice thin and sweet, like the call of a shepherd's reed, going home, "It hasn't turned out so bad, after all."

"Not so bad," her husband agreed.

"What do you suppose makes it?" Her long, slim finger, still beautiful, fluttered in her hand, like a hummingbird's wing, and pointed at the pot squatting streaked and stained between them.

He shook his head, and his spectacles wagged a bit.

"Do you suppose—" she speculated, "—you just—wished it that way?"

"Eh?" The old man's eyes filmed over a bit, brightened as he remembered. "Why, dear, maybe I did, at that."

"What were you doing that morning, Tom?"

He knew what she meant, and tried to recall. He saw himself, young, limber, straight as a sunflower, coming into the kitchen . . . seeing the pot on the table, sighing an early morning sigh, and thinking how—

"Why, I believe I was thinking how nice it would be if I didn't have to go to all the trouble of making coffee that morning, dear. How nice it would be if it were *always* full of coffee."

They were silent, looking at the pot.

"Then you wished," she said, after a time. "—And you got your wish."

He chuckled, hoarsely. "Remember how you imagined it might be partly in another dimension?"

She pouted, as prettily as ever. "And so it might have been. They might have—teleported your silent wish in some way—"

The old woman had made many more trips to the library and news-stands, especially after the children were grown.

The old man had no wish to upset her. He sighed. "We didn't have many luxuries, all these years," he said, changing the subject deftly. "But they were good years, and we got along."

"Say, wouldn't it have been nice, though, to have had a few little things. Just a few—" she said.

"If we could have started the restaurant, we might have, maybe," he agreed. He cleared his throat phlegmatically. "I always wanted to get you something special, honeydear," he said, using his special name for her, "—a golden ring or earrings, some sort of jewel—a diamond, maybe."

The old woman saw, in the corner of the old man's eye, a bit of a gleam and a brightness. And that was diamond enough for her. It always had been.

She looked at the pot. "Did it ever occur to you," she said. "We never lifted the coffee pot's cover, to see what was inside."

"Coffee, that's all. Just coffee." The old man smiled.

"No," she said, rising. "Maybe a little man, in contact with—with *them* out there, getting the coffee from some place."

She took the old pot by the handle, and started toward the sink with it. Creakily, old Tom rose, holding out a speckled hand to stop her.

"No, my dear," he said. "Let well enough alone. I was always afraid to lift that lid. Something might happen."

"Nonsense!" the old woman said sharply. "We're both old, ready to go anyhow. We never made the break to start the restaurant. We were always afraid to lift the lid. But now—now that's all in the past. We're not too old to satisfy our curiosity."

"We might not like what we find," the old man said, but he knew when the little lady's mind was made up.

"Whatever it is," she said, "it was meant to be that way. And anyhow," she concluded with typical feminine logic, "I've got to know."

Old Tom stood next to the woman he'd loved and struggled with for over a generation, watching her hold the streaked pot over the cracked porcelain of the sink. He held his breath as she tilted the handle slightly and, with a gingerly motion, lifted the top.

Lifted it straight into the air.

Over her shoulder, the old man peered, his face close to hers. As always, when his face was close to hers, even after all these years, he felt at peace, and satisfied, and, yes, even yet, just a little thrilled.

Slowly now, the old head turned on the wrinkled old neck until he was looking at his wife. Looking at her face as she saw what was in the pot. Looking at her face and the dancing, multi-coloured motes of light reflected on the delicate pale skin that age had made almost translucent.

Then, as they were looking at each other, realization and the joke of it dawning bright within them both, they began to laugh—helplessly, almost hysterically, and little old Betty upended the streaked, stained pot, held it trembling over the sink . . .

. . . Held it, as from the wide mouth cascaded the sparkling, steady stream that tinkled with a crystalline clamour as it hit the stained, cracked porcelain . . . tinkled and crackled, and glittered, catching the light in the room in all its millions and trillions of facets and capturing it, sundering it into all the colours of the rainbow and beyond—multi-hued, pouring endlessly, endlessly—

Pouring and pouring and pouring, filling the sink to overflowing with flawless, perfectly-cut diamonds.

—Joseph Slotkin

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